

Shadow Slave



by Guiltythree

 **WEBNOVEL**
FICTIONAL STORIES HUB

Chapter 1: Nightmare Begins | Shadow Slave

A frail-looking young man with pale skin and dark circles under his eyes was sitting on a rusty bench across from the police station. He was cradling a cup of coffee in his hands — not the cheap synthetic type slum rats like him had access to, but the real deal. This cup of plant-based coffee, usually available only to higher rank citizens, had cost most of his savings. But on this particular day, Sunny decided to pamper himself.

After all, his life was coming to an end.

Enjoying the warmth of the luxurious drink, he raised the cup and savored the aroma. Then, tentatively, he took a small sip... and immediately grimaced.

"Ah! So bitter!"

Giving the cup of coffee an intense look, Sunny sighed and forced himself to drink some more. Bitter or not, he was determined to get his money's worth — taste buds be damned.

"I should have bought a piece of real meat instead. Who knew actual coffee is so disgusting? Well. It's going to keep me awake, at least."

He stared into the distance, dozing off, and then slapped himself in the face to wake up.

"Tsk. What a rip-off."

Shaking his head and cursing, Sunny finished the coffee and stood up. Rich people living in this part of the city were rushing past the small park on their way to work, staring at him with strange expressions. Looking haggard in his cheap clothes and from the lack of sleep, unhealthily thin and pale, Sunny was indeed out of his place here. Also, everyone seemed so tall. Watching them with a bit of envy, he tossed the cup into a garbage bin.

"I guess that's what three full meals a day would do to you."

The cup missed the bin by a wide margin and fell on the ground. Sunny rolled his eyes in exasperation, walked over and picked it up before

carefully putting it in the trash. Then, with a slight grin, he crossed the street and entered the police station.

Inside, a tired-looking officer gave him a quick glance and frowned with obvious distaste.

"Are you lost, boy?"

Sunny looked around with curiosity, noting reinforced armor plates on the walls and poorly hidden turret nests in the ceiling. The officer, too, looked scruffy and mean. At least police stations remained the same wherever you go.

"Hey! I'm talking to you!"

Sunny cleared his throat.

"Uh, no."

Then he scratched the back of his head and added:

"As demanded by the Third Special Directive, I am here to surrender myself as a carrier of the Nightmare Spell."

The officer's expression instantly changed from irritated to wary. He looked the young man over once again, this time with piercing intensity.

"Are you sure you are infected? When did you start showing symptoms?"

Sunny shrugged.

"A week ago?"

The officer became visibly paler.

"Shit."

Then, with a hurried motion, he pressed a button on his terminal and bellowed:

"Attention! Code Black in the lobby! I repeat! CODE BLACK!"

The Nightmare Spell first appeared in the world a few decades ago. Back then, the planet was just starting to recover from a series of devastating natural disasters and subsequent resource wars.

At first, the emergence of a new disease that caused millions of people to complain about constant fatigue and sleepiness did not attract a lot of attention. But when they started to fall into an unnatural slumber, with no sign of waking up even days later, governments finally panicked. Of course, by then it was already too late — not that an early response could have made any difference.

When the infected started dying in their sleep, their dead bodies turning into monsters, no one was ready. Nightmare Creatures quickly overwhelmed national militaries, plunging the world into complete chaos.

No one knew what the Spell was, what powers it possessed, and how to fight it.

In the end, it was the Awakened — those who survived the first trials of the Spell and came back alive — who put a stop to its rampage. Armed with miraculous abilities earned in their Nightmares, they restored peace and created a semblance of a new order.

Of course, it was only the first of the catastrophes brought upon by the Spell. But as far as Sunny was concerned, none of it had anything to do with him — not until a few days ago, that is, when he first started having trouble with staying awake.

For an average person, being chosen by the Spell was as much of a risk as an opportunity. Kids learned survival skills and fighting techniques in school, on the off chance of being infected. Well-to-do families hired private tutors to train their children in all sorts of martial arts. Those from the Awakened clans even had access to powerful legacies, wielding inherited Memories and Echoes in their first visit to the Dream Realm.

The richer your family was, the better your chances of surviving and becoming an Awakened were.

But for Sunny, who had no family to speak of and spent most of his time scrounging for food instead of going to school, being chosen by the Spell presented no opportunity at all. To him, it was basically a death sentence.

A few minutes later, Sunny was yawning while several policemen were busy putting him in restraints. Soon he was fastened into a bulky chair that looked like a weird mix between a hospital bed and a torture device. The room they were in was situated in the basement of the police station, with thick armored walls and a formidable-looking vault door. Other officers were standing near the walls, with automatic rifles in their hands and grim expressions on their faces.

Sunny did not particularly care about them. The only thing he could think about was how much he wanted to sleep.

Finally, the vault door opened, and a gray-haired policeman walked in. He had a seasoned face and stern eyes, looking like someone who had seen a lot of terrible things in his life. After checking the restraints, the policeman glanced quickly on his wristwatch and then turned to Sunny:

"What's your name, kid?"

Sunny blinked a few times, trying to concentrate, then shifted uncomfortably.

"Sunless."

The old policeman raised an eyebrow.

"Sunless? That's a strange name."

Sunny tried to shrug, but found himself unable to move.

"What's so strange about it? At least I have a name. Back in the outskirts, not everyone even gets one."

After another yawn, he added:

"It's because I was born during a solar eclipse. My mom had a poetic soul, you see."

That's why he got this weird-ass name and his little sister was called Rain... back when she still lived with them, at least. Whether it was the result of poetic imagination or simple laziness, he did not know.

The old policeman grunted.

"Do you want me to contact your family?"

Sunny simply shook his head.

"There's no one. Don't bother."

For a second, there was a dark look on the policeman's face. Then his expression turned serious.

"Alright, Sunless. How long can you stay awake?"

"Uh... not long."

The policeman sighed.

"Then we don't have time for the full procedure. Try to resist for as long as you can and listen to me very carefully. Okay?"

Not waiting for a response, he added:

"How much do you know about the Nightmare Spell?"

Sunny gave him a questioning look.

"As much as anyone, I guess? Who doesn't know about the Spell?"

"Not the fancy stuff you see in dramas and hear in the propaganda broadcasts. I mean how much do you really know?"

That was a hard question to answer.

"Don't I just go into the Dream Realm, kill a few monsters to complete the First Nightmare, receive magic powers and become an Awakened?"

The old policeman shook his head.

"Listen carefully. Once you fall asleep, you will be transported inside your First Nightmare. Nightmares are trials created by the Spell. Once inside, you will meet monsters, sure, but you will also meet people. Remember: they are not real. They're just illusions conjured up to test you."

"How do you know?"

The policeman just stared at him.

"I mean, no one understands what the Spell is and how it works, right? So how do you know that they're not real?"

"You might have to kill them, kid. So do yourself a favor and just think about them as illusions."

"Oh."

The old policeman waited for a second, then nodded and continued.

"A lot of things about the First Nightmare depend on luck. Generally, it shouldn't be overwhelmingly hard. The situation you're in, the tools you have at your disposal and the creatures you have to defeat should be within the range of your abilities, at least. After all, the Spell sets up trials, not executions. You're a bit disadvantaged due to... well... your circumstances. But kids from the outskirts are tough. Don't give up on yourself just yet."

"Uh-uh."

Sunny was getting more and more sleepy. It was becoming hard to follow the conversation.

"About those "magic powers" you mentioned... you will indeed receive them if you survive until the end of the Nightmare. What those powers will be, exactly, depends on your natural affinity as well what you do during the trial. But some of it will be at your disposal right from the start..."

The voice of the old policeman sounded more and more distant. Sunny's eyelids were so heavy that he was struggling to keep his eyes open.

"Remember: the first thing you must do once inside the Nightmare is to check your Attributes and your Aspect. If you get a combat-oriented Aspect, something like a Swordsman or an Archer, things will be easier. If it is reinforced by a physical Attribute, then that's even better. Combat Aspects are the most common, so the probability of receiving one is high."

The armored room was growing dimmer.

"If you're unlucky and your Aspect has nothing to do with combat, don't despair. Sorcery and utility Aspects are useful in their own ways, you'll just have to be smart about it. There are really no useless Aspects. Well, almost. So just do anything in your power to survive."

"If you survive, you will be halfway to becoming an Awakened. But if you die, you'll open a gate for a Nightmare Creature to appear in the real world. Which means that my colleagues and I will have to deal with it. So... please don't die, Sunless."

Already half-asleep, Sunny felt a bit touched by the policeman's words.

"Or, at least, try to not die right away. The nearest Awakened won't be able to get here for a few hours, so we would really appreciate it if you don't make us fight that thing ourselves..."

'What?'

With that last thought, Sunny finally slipped into a deep slumber.

Everything became black.

And then, in the darkness, a faintly familiar voice rang:

[Aspirant! Welcome to the Nightmare Spell. Prepare for your First Trial...]

Chapter 2: Slave Caravan | Shadow Slave

Sunny dreamt of a mountain.

Jagged and lonesome, it dwarfed other peaks of the mountain chain, cutting the night sky with its sharp edges. A radiant moon bathed its slopes in the ghostly, pale light.

On one of the slopes, the remnants of an old road stubbornly clung to the rocks. Here and there, weathered paved stones could be seen through the snow. To the right side of the road, a sheer cliff face rose as an impregnable wall. To the left, a silent black sea of nothingness indicated an endless fall. Strong winds crashed into the mountain over and over again, screaming in powerless rage.

Suddenly, the moon fell over the horizon. The sun rose from the west, streaked across the sky and disappeared in the east. Snowflakes jumped from the ground and returned into the embrace of clouds. Sunny realized that he was seeing the flow of time in reverse.

In an instant, hundreds of years flew by. The snow retreated, baring the old road. Cold shivers ran down Sunny's back as he noticed human bones littering the ground. A moment later, the bones were gone, and in their place, a slave caravan appeared, moving backwards down the mountain in the clamor of chains.

Time slowed, stopped, and then resumed its usual pace.

[Aspirant! Welcome to the Nightmare Spell. Prepare for your First Trial...]

'What... what the hell is this?'

Step. Step. Another step.

A dull ache was radiating through Sunny's bleeding feet as he was shivering from cold. His threadbare tunic was nearly useless against the biting wind. His wrists were the main source of agony: badly hurt by the iron shackles, they sent a sharp pang of pain every time the freezing metal touched his broken skin.

'What kind of a situation is this?'

Sunny looked up and down, noticing a long chain winding up the road, with dozens and dozens of hollow-eyed people — slaves just like him — shackled to it at small intervals. Ahead of him, a man with broad shoulders and a bloodied back was walking with a measured gait. Behind him, a shifty-looking guy with quick, desperate eyes was quietly cursing under his breath in a language that Sunny did not know, but somehow still understood. From time to time, armed horsemen in ancient-style armor would pass by, giving the slaves menacing looks.

However you judged it, things were really bad.

Sunny was more bewildered than panicked. True, these circumstances were not like what the First Nightmares were supposed to be. Usually, freshly chosen aspirants would find themselves in a scenario that presented them with a fair amount of agency: they would become members of privileged or warrior casts, with plenty of access to necessary weapons to at least try to tackle any conflict.

Starting out as a powerless slave, shackled and already half-dead, was as far from being ideal as one could imagine.

However, the Spell was as much about challenge as it was about balance. As the old policeman said, it created trials, not executions. So Sunny was pretty sure that, to counter this abysmal start, it would reward him with something good. A powerful Aspect, at least.

'Let's see... how do I do this?'

Remembering popular webtoons he read as a child, Sunny concentrated and thought about words like "status", "myself" and "information". Indeed, as soon as he focused, shimmering runes appeared in the air in front of him. Once again, although he did not know this ancient alphabet, the meaning behind it was somehow clear.

He quickly found the rune describing his Aspect... and, finally, lost his composure.

'What?! What the actual fuck?!'

Name: Sunless.

True Name: —

Rank: Aspirant.

Soul Core: Dormant.

Memories: —

Echoes: —

Attributes: [Fated], [Mark of Divinity], [Child of Shadows].

Aspect: [Temple Slave].

Aspect Description: [Slave is a useless wretch with no skills or abilities worth a mention. A temple slave is just the same, except much rarer.]

Speechless, Sunny stared at the runes, trying to convince himself that he was maybe just seeing things. Surely, he couldn't be that unlucky... right?

'No useless Aspects my ass!'

As soon as this thought appeared in his mind, he lost the rhythm of his steps and stumbled, pulling the chain down with his weight. Immediately, the shifty guy behind him screamed:

"Whore's bastard! Watch where you're going!"

Sunny hurriedly dismissed the runes, which were only visible to him, and tried to recover his balance. A moment later, he was once again walking steadily — however, not before inadvertently pulling on the chain one more time.

"You little shit! I'm going to kill you!"

The broad-shouldered man in front of Sunny chuckled without turning his head.

"Why bother? The weakling will be dead by sunrise anyway. The mountain will kill him."

A few seconds later, he added:

"It'll kill you and me, too. Just a bit later. I really don't know what the Imperials are thinking, forcing us into this cold."

The shifty guy gasped.

"Speak for yourself, fool! I'm planning to survive!"

Sunny silently shook his head and concentrated on not falling again.

'What a charming pair.'

Suddenly, a third voice joined the conversation from somewhere further back. This one sounded gentle and intelligent.

"This mountain pass is usually much warmer this time of year. We just had really bad luck. Also, I would advise you against harming this boy."

"Why is that?"

Sunny turned his head slightly, listening.

"Haven't you seen the markings on his skin? He is not like us, who fell into slavery due to debts, crimes or misfortune. He was born a slave. A temple slave, to be precise. Not long ago, the Imperials destroyed the last temple of the Shadow God. I suspect that this is how the boy ended up here."

The broad-shouldered man cast a look back.

"So what? Why should we be afraid of a half-forgotten, weakling god? He couldn't even save his own temples."

"The Empire is protected by the mighty War God. Of course they're not afraid to burn down a few temples. But we here are not protected by anything or anyone. Do you really want to risk angering a god?"

The broad-shouldered man grunted, not willing to answer.

Their conversation was stopped by a young soldier riding a beautiful, white horse. Clad in a simple leather cuirass, armed with a spear and a short sword, he looked dignified and noble. To Sunny's irritation, the asshole was really pretty, too. If this was a historical drama, the soldier would definitely be a male lead.

"What is going on here?"

There was no particular menace in his voice, even something resembling concern.

When everyone hesitated, the gentle-voiced slave answered:

"It's nothing, sir. We are just all tired and cold. Especially our young friend over there. This journey is truly too hard for someone that young."

The soldier looked at Sunny with pity.

'What are you looking at? You're not much older than me!' Sunny thought.

Of course, he didn't say anything out loud.

The soldier sighed and took a flask from his belt before extending it to Sunny.

"Bear with it a little more, child. We will stop for the night soon. For now, here, drink some water."

'Child? Child?!'

Due to his thin body and small stature, both caused by malnourishment, Sunny was often mistaken for someone younger. Usually, he didn't hesitate to use it to his advantage, but now, for some reason, being called a child really irked him.

Still, he was really thirsty.

He was just about to take the flask when a whip cracked in the air, and suddenly Sunny was in a world of pain. He stumbled, once again pulling on the chain and causing the shifty slave behind him to curse.

Another soldier, this one older and angrier, stopped his horse a few steps back. The whip that sliced the back of Sunny's tunic open and drew blood belonged to him. Without even glancing at the slaves, the older soldier pierced his younger colleague with a disdainful glare.

"What do you think you're doing?"

The young soldier's face darkened.

"I was just giving this boy some water."

"He'll receive water with the rest of them once we camp!"

"But..."

"Shut your mouth! These slaves are not your friends. Understood? They're not even people. Treat them like people and they'll begin imagining things."

The young soldier looked at Sunny, then lowered his head and put the flask back on his belt.

"Don't let me catch you making friends with slaves again, newbie. Or next time it will be your back tasting my whip!"

As if to illustrate his intention, the older soldier cracked his whip in the air and rode past them, radiating threat and anger. Sunny watched him go with well-concealed malice.

'I don't know how, but I will watch you die first.'

Then he turned his head and glanced in the direction of the younger soldier, who was falling behind with his head still lowered.

'And you, second.'

Chapter 3: The Strings Of Fate

For a few minutes after that, Sunny was in a dark mood. But then he pulled himself out of it and inhaled deeply, trying to enjoy the fresh air. Indeed, air like that was hard to come by in the real world: micro dust and other pollutants made it rough and unpleasant, not to mention the general stench of the outskirts. In the better parts of the city, sophisticated filtration systems worked diligently — however, filtrated air tasted sterile and stagnant. Only the very rich had access to truly pleasant breathing.

And here he was, able to enjoy an unlimited amount of pristine, delicious air like a second-generation chaebol.

'Truly, being chosen by the Spell has its benefits.'

If only there was no dreadful cold, his feet did not ache, and his wrists and back were not in agony!

The slave caravan slowly dragged itself up the mountain, with more and more slaves stumbling and periodically falling to the ground. A couple of times, those who could not walk anymore were taken off the chain and unceremoniously tossed off the road, down into the abyss that loomed to the left of it. Sunny watched them fall with a bit of compassion.

'Poor fellows. Rest in peace, you pitiful souls.'

All in all, he was in good spirits.

It was a bit strange to feel good amidst this disaster of a Nightmare, but, thankfully, Sunny had time to prepare himself for this eventuality. When the symptoms of the Spell first appeared, he did not handle it well. Dying before you even turn seventeen was not something one could easily cope with.

But, in the end, it only took Sunny several days to come to terms with it. After visiting his parents' makeshift resting place — well, actually, since he was too poor to afford even the cheapest slot in the remembrance facility, it was just two lines carved into an old tree — and adding a third line for himself, Sunny suddenly became relaxed and carefree.

After all, he didn't have to worry about earning money, finding food, protecting himself and planning for the future anymore. Once the worst that could happen had already happened, what else was there to fear?

So, becoming a slave and slowly freezing to death was not that much of a shock.

Besides, he knew that cold would not kill him — simply because he had already seen what fate was awaiting the caravan further up the mountain. The picture of piled bones littering the ground was still fresh in his mind. Most likely, it was a pack of monsters that were going to do the caravan in... and by the look of it, the attack was going to take place in a matter of hours, not days.

So he still had a chance.

Using the opportunity, Sunny decided to take another look at his status and summoned the runes again. The last time he was too outraged by the Aspect and didn't study the Attributes well. While not as important as one's Aspect, the Attributes were often the deciding factor between life and death. They represented one's natural traits and affinities, sometimes even providing passive abilities and effects.

[Fated] Attribute Description: "The strings of fate wrap tightly around you. Unlikely events, both good and bad, are drawn by your presence. There are those who are blessed, and there are those who are cursed... but rarely both."

[Mark of Divinity] Attribute Description: "You bear a faint scent of divinity, as though someone briefly touched by it once, a long time ago."

[Child of Shadows] Attribute Description: "Shadows recognize you as one of their own."

'Hmmm... Interesting.'

Sunny quickly recognized the first attribute, [Fated], as the main culprit of his predicament. At first glance, it seemed to indicate that he was destined

for a certain fate — to die miserably and vanish without a trace, for example. But after reading the description, he realized that being fated actually just meant that improbable things had a higher chance of occurring when he was around.

'I guess this is how I managed to receive one of the super rare useless Aspects — and a weird variant of it, at that!'

If [Fated] was his innate Attribute, then the other two came from the [Temple Slave] Aspect. [Mark of Divinity] was more a less straightforward — it was supposed to allow passage into certain sacred places inside the Dream Realm and enhance several types of sorcery. Since there were no sacred places in sight and Sunny's Aspect had nothing to do with sorcery, it was useless, too.

[Child of Shadows] was a stranger one. He had never heard of it and had no idea what it was supposed to do — at least not until the sun hid behind the mountain and the sky began to darken. To his surprise, Sunny found himself able to see perfectly in the darkness, as though it was still as bright as day. This ability alone was nothing to scoff at, and it was quite possible that shadows would reward him with some other, yet unknown, gifts.

'Finally something good. I wonder if...'

"Stop the caravan! Prepare to camp!"

Following the head soldier's order, the slaves stopped and fell to the ground, shivering and exhausted. The small clearing where the road widened was somewhat protected from the wind by a protruding mass of rock, but it was still too cold to rest with ease.

The soldiers got busy herding the slaves into a tight circle, forcing them to share warmth, and lighting up a large bonfire in the center of the camp — although not before tending to their horses. The heavy wagon carrying food, water and other cargo, to which the main chain was firmly affixed, was pushed forward to block the wind. While looking around, Sunny noticed the young soldier from before watching the mountain with a complicated look on his face.

'What a weirdo.'

Soon, the bonfire was blazing. The stronger slaves tried to find their way closer to the fire, while the weaker ones, like Sunny, were forced to sit at the outer end of the circle, with their backs freezing in the cold. Of course, any movement was encumbered by the fact that they were still shackled to the chain. That's why the familiar broad-shouldered slave ended up just where he started despite all of his efforts to get closer to the flame.

"Damn Imperials!" he hissed, clearly irritated.

The soldiers walked among the slaves, giving them water and food. Sunny, just like everybody else, received a few sips of icy water and a small piece of rock-hard, moldy bread. Despite its unappetizing look, he forced himself to eat the whole thing, just to be left as hungry as he was before.

By the looks of it, he wasn't the only one.

The shifty slave that had been walking behind him looked around in anguish.

"By all the gods, they used to feed me better even in the dungeons!"

He spat on the ground, desperate.

"And most of us innocent men in the dungeon were there waiting to visit the gallows, too!"

A few steps away from them, where the paved road ended and sharp rocks began, a scattering of bright-red berries were growing from the snow. Sunny had noticed them before, clustering here and there along the road, and even noted how pretty those resilient things looked contrasted against the white. The shifty slave's eyes glistened as he tried to crawl towards the berries on all fours.

"I would advise against eating those, friend."

It was the gentle-voiced slave again. Sunny turned around and finally saw him in the flesh for the first time. It was a tall man in his forties, lean and

strangely handsome, with a dignified look of a scholar. How a man such as him ended up a slave was a mystery. Yet there he was.

"You and your advice again! What?! Why?!"

The scholar smiled apologetically.

"These berries are called Bloodbane. They grow in the places where human blood was spilled. That's why there's always a lot of them along the slave trade routes."

"So what?"

The older man sighed.

"Bloodbane is poisonous. A few berries might be enough to kill an adult man."

"Curses!"

The shifty slave flinched back and glared at the scholar.

Sunny did not pay them a lot of attention.

Because, while looking around, he finally recognized the site of the camp as the place where, in his vision at the start of the Nightmare, the bones of the slaves were buried under the snow. And he was willing to bet that whatever it was that killed them all was going to happen soon.

As if to answer his thoughts, a thundering noise rang from above.

And in the next second, something massive came crashing from the sky...

Chapter 4: Mountain King | Shadow Slave

Turning in the direction of the thundering noise, many slaves rose their heads — only to see rocks and heavy shards of ice raining on them from above. They instantly panicked, lurching away in a cacophony of screams. Shadows happily danced on black stones as, entangled by the thick chain, those slaves fell to the ground and pulled others with them.

Sunny was one of the few that remained upright, mostly because he was ready for something like this to happen. Calm and collected, he gazed at the night sky, his Attribute-enhanced eyes piercing the darkness, and took one measured step back. In the next second, a piece of ice the size of a man's torso hit the ground right in front of him and exploded, showering everything around with sharp shards.

Others weren't that quick. As ice and stones continued to rain, many were wounded, and a few even lost their lives. Agonizing wails filled the air.

"On your feet, fools! Get to the wall!"

The veteran soldier — the one who had whipped Sunny a few hours before — was shouting angrily, trying to get the slaves to move towards the relative safety of the mountain slope. However, before anyone could heed his command, something massive came crashing down, sending a tremor through the stones beneath their feet. It fell right between the caravan and the mountain wall, plunging everything into silence for a few seconds.

At first, it looked like a lump of dirty snow, roughly round in shape and as tall as a mounted horseman. However, once the creature unfurled its long limbs and rose, it towered over the stone platform like a nightmarish omen of death.

'That thing must be at least four meters tall,' Sunny thought, a bit stunned.

The creature had two stumpy legs, an emaciated, hunched torso and disproportionately long, multijointed hands — two of them, each ending with a set of horrifying bone claws, and another two, these ones shorter, ending with almost human-like fingers. The thing that at first glance looked like dirty snow turned out to be its fur, yellowish-grey and ragged, thick enough to stop arrows and swords.

On its head, five milky, white eyes regarded the slaves with insect-like indifference. Beneath them, a terrible maw crowding with razor-sharp teeth was half-open, as though in anticipation. Viscous drool was running down the creature's chin and dripping into the snow.

What unnerved Sunny the most, though, were the strange shapes endlessly moving, worm-like, under the creature's skin. He could see them clearly because, unfortunately, he was one of those unlucky souls closest to the monstrosity, getting a nauseating first-row view.

'Well, that is just... too much,' he thought, stupefied.

As soon as Sunny finished that thought, all hell broke loose. The creature moved, slashing its claws in his general direction. But Sunny was one step ahead: without wasting a single moment, he jumped sideways — as far as the chain allowed — conveniently placing the broad-shouldered slave between himself and the monster.

His quick reaction saved his life, as those sharp claws, each as long as a sword, sliced through the broad-shouldered man a fraction of a second later and sent streams of blood flying through the air. Drenched in the hot liquid, Sunny hit the ground, and his fellow slave — now simply a corpse — fell on him from above.

'Damn! Why are you so heavy!'

Temporarily blinded, Sunny heard a chilling howl and felt an enormous shadow passing over him. Immediately after, a deafening chorus of screams filled the night. Not paying it any attention, he tried to roll the corpse to the side, but was stopped by a forceful lurch of the chain that twisted his wrists and filled his mind with white-hot pain. Disoriented, he felt himself being dragged a few steps, but then the chain suddenly slackened, and he was able to control his hands again.

'See, things could have been worse...'

Putting his palms against the dead man's chest, he pushed with all the strength he had. The heavy corpse stubbornly resisted all his attempts, but

then finally fell sideways, setting Sunny free. However, he didn't get to celebrate this newly found freedom, as his blood suddenly turned to ice.

Because at that moment, with his palms still pressed against the broad-shouldered slave's bleeding body, he clearly felt something wriggling under the dead man's skin.

'You just had to think about how things could get worse, right, you idiot?' he thought, and then flinched back.

Pushing the corpse with his legs, Sunny crawled as far away from it as he could — which was about a meter and a half, thanks to the ever-present chain. He quickly glanced around, noticing a mass of dancing shadows and the silhouette of the monster rampaging amidst the screaming slaves on the opposite end of the stone platform. Then he concentrated on the dead body, which was starting to convulse with growing violence.

On the opposite side of the corpse, the shifty slave was looking at it with slackened jaw and a horrified expression on his face. Sunny waved to get his attention.

"What are you staring at?! Move away from it!"

The shifty slave tried, but immediately fell down. The chain was twisted between the three of them, pinned down under by the broad-shouldered man's weight.

Sunny clenched his teeth.

Right under his eyes, the corpse was going through a nightmare-inducing metamorphose. Strange bone growths pierced its skin, extending like spikes. The muscles bulged and wriggled, as though trying to change shape. The fingernails were turning into sharp claws; the face cracked and split, bearing open a twisted mouth with one too many rows of bloodied, needle-like fangs.

'This is not right.'

Sunny twitched, feeling a strong urge to empty his stomach.

"Th— the chain!"

The scholarly slave was just a few steps behind the shifty one, pointing at his shackles with a face as pale as a ghost. That remark was far from helpful, but given the circumstances, his shock was understandable. Being shackled was bad enough, but being shackled to such horror was truly unfair.

But Sunny's conclusion that things weren't right did not come from self-pity. He just meant that this whole situation was literally not right: the Spell, mysterious as it was, had its own set of rules. There were rules for what type of creatures could appear in any given Nightmare, too.

Nightmare Creatures had their own hierarchy: from mindless Beasts to Monsters, followed by Demons, Devils, Tyrants, Terrors and, finally, mythical Titans, also known as Calamities. The First Nightmare was almost always populated by beasts and monsters, rarely with a demon mixed in. And Sunny had never, ever heard about anything stronger than a single devil appearing in it.

However, the creature had clearly just created a lesser version of itself — an ability that belonged exclusively to tyrants, the sovereigns of the Nightmare Spell, and those above them.

What was this tyrant even doing in a First Nightmare?

How powerful was that damn [Fated] attribute?!

But there was no time to ponder.

Unfair or not, there was only one person now who could save Sunny — himself.

The broad-shouldered man — what was left of him — slowly rose, his mouth producing strange clicking noises. Without giving him time to fully

come to his senses, Sunny cursed and jumped forward, grabbing onto the length of the slackened chain.

One arm of the monster, now fully equipped with five jagged claws, shot forward to meet him, but Sunny sidestepped it with one calculated movement.

What save his skin this time was not quick reaction, but simple presence of mind. Sunny might not have learned any fancy combat techniques, since his childhood was spent on the streets instead of a school. But the streets, too, were a kind of teacher. He had spent his whole life fighting for survival, quite often literally. That experience allowed him to keep a cool head on his shoulders in the midst of any conflict.

So instead of freezing or being consumed by fear and doubt, Sunny just acted.

Stepping close, he threw the chain around the monster's shoulders and pulled, pinning its hands to its body. Before the creature, still slow and groggy from its transformation, could properly react, Sunny wrapped the chain around it several times, barely saving his face from being bitten off by the creature's terrifying maw.

The good thing was, the monster couldn't move its hands now.

The bad thing was, the length of the chain he used to immobilize it was gone, leaving almost no distance between them.

"You two!" Sunny screamed, addressing his two fellow slaves. "Pull on that chain as though your lives depend on it!"

Because they were.

The shifty slave and the scholar gaped at him and then, understanding what he was thinking, started to move. Grabbing the chain from the opposite directions, they pulled as hard as they could, tightening its grip on the monster and not letting it shake loose.

'Great!' Sunny thought.

The monster bulged its muscles, trying to break free. The chain creaked, caught on the bone spikes, as though slowly breaking apart.

'Not so great!'

Without wasting any more time, he threw his hands in the air and caught the creature's neck with the short, thinner chain connecting his shackles together. Then he circled the monster with a quick step and pulled, ending up back to back with it — as far away from its maw as he could.

Sunny knew that he wasn't strong enough to strangle a man with his bare hands — let alone a weird, terrifying mutant like the one trying to eat him. But now, using his own back as a lever and the weight of his whole body to pull the shackles down, he at least stood a chance.

He pulled down with all his might, feeling the monster's body pressing against him, bone spikes brushing against his skin. The monster continued to struggle, clicking loudly and trying to break the chain tying him down apart.

Now it was just a question of what would break first — the chain or the monster itself.

'Die! Die, you bastard!'

Sweat and blood were rolling down Sunny's face as he was pulling, and pulling, and pulling down with as much force as he could muster.

Every second felt like an eternity. His strength and stamina — what little he had to begin with — were quickly running out. His wounded back, wrists, and muscles pierced by the bone spikes were in agony.

And then, finally, Sunny felt the monster's body go limp.

A moment later, a faintly familiar voice rang in the air.

It was the most beautiful sound he had ever heard.

[You have slain a dormant beast, Mountain King's Larva.]

Chapter 5: Broken Chains | Shadow Slave

[You have slain a dormant beast, Mountain King's Larva.]

Sunny fell to his knees, breathless. His whole body felt as though it just went through a meat grinder: even large amounts of adrenalin could not wash away all the pain and exhaustion. And yet, he was exhilarated. The satisfaction of killing the larva was so vast that he even forgot to be disappointed about not receiving a Memory — the special item tied to a Dream Realm inhabitant's essence, which was sometimes awarded by the Spell to the triumphant Awakened.

A magic sword or a suit of armor would have come in handy right about now. Damn, he would even settle for a warm coat.

'Three seconds. You can rest for three more seconds,' Sunny thought.

After all, the nightmare was far from over.

A few moments later, he forced himself to come back to his senses and looked around, trying to ascertain the situation.

The larva was dead, which was great. However, he was still tied to it by the damn chain — the shifty slave and the scholar, both pale as death, were busy untangling it to buy the three of them at least some freedom of movement.

Further away, torn bodies and pieces of flesh were lying on the ground. Many slaves were killed. A few had somehow managed to escape and were now running away.

'Fools. They're dooming themselves.'

The chain, as it turns out, was at some point broken in two — that's why it suddenly slackened when Sunny was being dragged by the mass of panicking slaves. If their shackles had a less sophisticated locking mechanism, he could have tried to free himself now. However, each pair was fixed to a specific link: without unlocking them, no one was going anywhere.

The tyrant — Mountain King, presumably — was hidden from sight by the bright glow of the bonfire. However, Sunny could feel its movements due to the subtle tremors spreading through the stones, as well as the desperate screams of those slaves who were yet to perish. An angry below or two could also be heard, indicating that some of the soldiers were still alive, desperately trying to fight the monstrosity off.

What pulled his attention the most, though, was the fact that several of the maimed bodies were starting to move.

'More larvae?'

His eyes widened.

One after another, four more corpses slowly rose to their feet. Each beast looked as disgusting as the first one had, and not a bit less deadly. The nearest was mere meters away from Sunny.

'Damn it all!' he thought.

And then, weakly: 'I want to wake up.'

As strange clicking filled the air, one of the beasts turned its head toward the three slaves and gnashed its fangs. Shifty fell on his ass, whispering a prayer, while Scholar just froze in place. Sunny's eyes darted to the ground, trying to find something to use as a weapon. But there was not a single thing he could use: full of vitriol, he simply wrapped a length of chain around the knuckles and raised his fists.

'Come at me, you bastard!'

The larva dashed forward with incredible speed in a flurry of claws, fangs, and terror. Sunny had less than a second to react; however, before he could do anything, a nimble figure moved past him, and a sharp sword flashed in the air. The monster, beheaded with one strike, fell gracelessly onto the ground.

Sunny blinked.

'What was that?'

Dumbfounded, he slowly turned his head and looked to his left. Standing there with a valorous expression was the handsome young soldier who had once offered him water. He looked calm and collected, if a little grim. There was not a speck of dirt or blood on his leather armor.

'He is. Awesome,' Sunny thought before catching himself.

'Poser! I mean he's a poser!'

With a short nod, the soldier moved forward to face the remaining three larvae. But after taking a few steps, he suddenly turned around and gave Sunny a long look. Then, with one swift motion, the young warrior took something from his belt and threw it to Sunny.

'Save yourself!'

With that, he was gone to fight the monsters.

Sunny reflexively caught the item and watched the soldier go. Then he lowered his gaze and studied the thing clutched tightly in his hand.

It was a short and narrow iron rod with a straight bend on its end.

'A key. It's a key.'

His heart began to beat faster.

'It's the key to the shackles!'

With one last glance at the fierce battle starting between the young soldier and the larvae, Sunny dropped on one knee and began to maneuver the shackles, trying to get his hand into a suitable position to insert the key. It took him a few tries to understand how the unfamiliar lock worked, but then, finally, there was a satisfying click, and he was suddenly free.

The cold wind caressed his bloodied wrists. Sunny rubbed them and smiled with a dark gleam in his eyes.

'Just you wait now.'

For a moment, visions of violence and revenge filled his head.

"Boy! Over here!"

Shifty was waving his hands in the air, trying to get his attention. Sunny briefly considered just leaving him to die, but then decided against it. There was strength in numbers.

Plus, despite Shifty's previous threats to kill him and overall unpleasantness, Sunny would have felt bad leaving a fellow slave in chains — especially since freeing him would not cost anything.

He hurried over to the other two slaves and quickly unlocked their shackles. As soon as Shifty was free, he pushed Sunny away and did a little dance, laughing like a maniac.

"Ah! Free at last! Gods must be smiling upon us!"

Scholar was more reserved. He squeezed Sunny's shoulder in gratitude and smiled weakly, casting a tense look in the direction of the ensuing fight.

Two of the three larvae were already dead; the third one was missing an arm but still trying to tear its opponent apart. The young soldier danced around it, moving with a graceful fluidity of a natural-born warrior.

"What are you waiting for?! Run!"

Shifty made a move to run away, but was stopped by Scholar.

"My friend, I would..."

"If you say "advise" again, I swear to gods, I will bash your head open!"

The two slaves looked at each other with open animosity. A moment later, Scholar lowered his eyes and sighed.

"If we run away now, we will surely die."

"Why?!"

The older slave simply pointed at the tall bonfire.

"Because without that fire, we will freeze to death before the night is over. Until the sun rises, running away is suicide."

Sunny did not say anything, knowing that Scholar was right. Actually, he realized it right after strangling the larva. No matter how terrible Mountain King was, the bonfire was still their only lifeline in this frozen hell.

It was just as what the broad-shouldered slave, may he rest in peace, had said. There was no need for anyone to kill them, because the mountain itself would do it if given a chance.

"So what?! I prefer freezing to death than being eaten by that monster anyway! Not to mention... ugh... turning into one of those things."

Shifty was pretending to be brave, but there was no conviction in his voice. He glanced at the darkness surrounding the stone platform and shivered before taking a small step back.

At this point, the third larva was long dead, and the young soldier was nowhere to be seen. He had probably gone to join the fight at the other side of the bonfire — leaving the three slaves alone at the mountainside part of the stone platform.

Scholar cleared his throat.

"The monster might be satiated with those it had already slain. It might be defeated or driven away by the Imperials. In any case, if we stay here, we have a chance to survive, however small. But if we run away, our doom will be certain."

"So what do we do?"

Unlike Scholar, Sunny was sure that Mountain King would not be satisfied with killing just most of the slaves. Neither did he believe that a bunch of mortals would really be able to defeat it.

Even if they were not normal people but Awakened, a fight with a tyrant was not something one could easily survive, let alone win.

But if he wanted to live, he had to get rid of that thing somehow.

"Let's go take a look."

Shifty looked at him as though seeing a lunatic.

"Are you insane? You want to get closer to that beast?!"

Sunny stared at him blankly, then shrugged and headed in the direction of the rampaging monster.

Chapter 6: Confronting The Tyrant

Sunny was off to face against a Nightmare Creature. And not any creature, at that, but one of the fifth category — a dreaded, fearsome tyrant. The odds of survival were so low that anyone would have laughed in his face if he were to ever suggest attempting to fight it. If they weren't an Awakened two or three ranks above the creature, of course.

Which Sunny certainly wasn't.

And yet, he had to deal with this Mountain King somehow to avoid an even more miserable death. The ridiculous degree to which the odds were stacked against him from the very beginning of this delayed execution had gotten old a long time ago, so he didn't have any more energy to think about it. What was there to fear, after all? He was already as good as dead. It's not like he could get any deader.

So why worry?

On the other side of the bonfire, things were turning from bad to worse. Most of the slaves were already dead. A few soldiers were still desperately trying to fight the monster, but it was clear that they weren't going to last long. Right in front of Sunny's eyes, the tyrant picked up a dead slave, dragging the chain up with him, and opened its terrifying maw wide. With one crushing bite, the slave's body was torn in half, leaving only bloodied stumps inside the shackles.

Mountain King's five indifferent, milky eyes stared into the distance as he chewed, streams of blood flowing down its chin.

Seeing that the creature's upper arms were busy, one of the soldiers screamed and lunged forward, brandishing his long spear. Without turning its head, the tyrant extended one of its shorter lower arms, caught the soldier's head in an iron grip and squeezed, crushing the poor man's skull like a soap bubble. A moment later, the headless body was tossed over the cliff and disappeared into the abyss below.

Shifty doubled over, puking his guts out. Then he shakily rose to his feet and glared at Sunny.

"Well? We've taken a look, now what?"

Sunny did not answer, pensively observing the tyrant with his head slightly tilted to one side. Shifty stared at him some more, then turned to Scholar.

"I'm telling you, old man, the boy is sick in the head. How the hell can he be so calm?!"

"Shhhh! Lower your voice, fool!"

Blood drained from Shifty's face as he slapped himself, covering his mouth with both hands. Then he cast a fearful look in the direction of the tyrant.

Luckily, the abomination was too busy feasting on the slaves — lucky ones who were already dead and unlucky ones who were still alive — to pay them any attention. Shifty slowly exhaled.

Sunny was preoccupied with thinking, measuring his chances of survival.

'How do I get rid of that thing?'

He didn't have any special powers, nor did he have an army ready to bury the tyrant under a mountain of bodies. He didn't even have a weapon to at least scratch the damn bastard.

Sunny moved his gaze and looked past the creature, into the endless darkness of the moonless sky. As he was watching the night, a bright flash streaked in the air and collided with one of the tyrant's arms, bursting into a rain of sparks. The young soldier — Sunny's heroic liberator — had just tossed a burning piece of wood at the monster and was now defiantly raising his sword.

"Face me, devil!"

'A distraction! Just what I needed!'

Because there was no way for Sunny to kill the Mountain King with his own two hands, he had decided to enlist some help. A human wouldn't be up to the task, so instead, he was planning to use a force of nature.

'Since I can't do the bastard in myself, let's make gravity do it for me.'

He was in the middle of thinking over the details of the plan when the young hero's foolish bravado presented an opportunity. Now everything depended on how long the pompous idiot would manage to stay alive.

"Come with me!" Sunny said as he started running toward the far end of the stone platform, where the heavy wagon was perched dangerously close to the edge of the cliff.

Shifty and Scholar shared a dubious look, but then followed, perhaps confusing his calmness with confidence, or maybe divine inspiration. After all, it was a widely known fact that crazy people were often favored by the gods.

Behind them, Hero nimbly ducked under the tyrant's claws, slashing it with the sword. The sharp edge slid ineffectively across the dirty fur, not living even a scratch on the creature's flash. In the next second, the tyrant moved with frightening speed, throwing all four of his hands in the direction of its new, irritating foe.

But Sunny had no way of knowing. He was running with all his speed, getting closer and closer to the wagon. Once there, he hurriedly looked around, checking if there were any larvae close by, and moved to its rear wheels.

The wagon was left at the upper end of the stone platform, where it narrowed and turned back into the road. It was turned sideways to block the wind, with its front facing the mountain wall and its back facing the cliff. There were two large wooden wedges placed under the rear wheels to prevent the wagon from rolling backward. Sunny turned to his companions and pointed at the wedges.

"When I tell you, remove both of them. Then push. Understand?"

"What? Why?"

Shifty stared at him with a dumbfounded expression on his face. Scholar just looked at the wedges, and then at the tyrant.

Hero, miraculously, was still alive. He was weaving between the creature's limbs, always just half a second away from being completely eviscerated. From time to time, his sword flashed in the air, but to no avail: Mountain King's fur was too thick, and his skin too tough to be harmed by mundane weapons. There was a hint of apprehension on the young warrior's face.

All the other soldiers, as far as Sunny could see, were already dead. So he really needed that one to live a little bit longer.

'Don't die yet!' he thought.

To Shifty, he simply said:

"You'll see."

The next moment, Sunny was running again, trying to follow the chain from the brace where it was affixed to the wagon. The thing he was searching for was hard to notice due to all the bodies, blood and viscera littering the stone platform, but for once, luck was on his side. A short amount of time later, he had found what he needed — the torn end of the chain.

Finding the nearest set of shackles, complete with a horribly disfigured body of a slave locked in them, Sunny plopped down on his knees and started to fumble with the key.

There was a muffled scream, and with a sideways glance, he noticed Hero flying through the air, finally caught by one of the tyrant's strikes. Incredibly, the young soldier managed to land on his feet, sliding several meters across the stones. All of his limbs were still in place; there were no terrible wounds on his body, either. Without skipping a bit, Hero rolled forward, picking up his sword from where it fell on the ground, and then rolled once more, this time sideways, narrowly avoiding a heavy stomp from the creature's foot.

"Rolling?! Who the hell rolls around in this situation?!"

Without any more time to waste, Sunny finally managed to unlock the shackles. Shaking the dead slave out of them, he then promptly locked them once again, this time around the chain itself — ending up with a makeshift slipknot and a loop.

Now everything depended on his resolve, hand-to-eye coordination... and luck.

Turning to Shifty and Scholar, who were still waiting by the wagon, he screamed:

"Now!"

Then, picking up a sizable length of chain, Sunny stood up and faced the tyrant.

Hero spared him half a glance. His eyes lingered on the chain for a moment and then quickly followed it to the wagon. Then, without showing a hint of emotion, the young warrior doubled his efforts, drawing the creature's attention away from Sunny.

'So he's smart, too? What a scam!'

Clearing his head of all unnecessary thoughts, Sunny concentrated on the weight of the chain in his hands, the distance between him and the tyrant, and his target.

Time seemed to slow down a bit.

'Please, don't miss!'

Gathering all of his strength, Sunny spun and threw the chain in the air, as though a fisherman casting his net. The loop opened as it flew, closing in on the position of the fight between Hero and the tyrant.

Sunny's plan was to place the loop on the ground close enough to them that, once one of the tyrant's feet landed in the trap, he could pull on the chain

and tighten it around the monster's ankle.

But his plan... failed spectacularly.

Which is to say, it was literally a spectacle.

In the last moment, Mountain King suddenly flinched back, and instead of falling on the ground, the chain loop landed perfectly around its neck. A second later it tightened, acting as an iron noose.

Sunny froze for a moment, not believing his eyes. And then clenched his fists, holding himself back from triumphantly shaking them in the air.

'YES!' he screamed inwardly.

Moments later, the wagon would roll off the cliff, pulling the tyrant down with it. Sunny looked back to make sure, and instantly turned even paler than he usually was.

Shifty and Scholar did manage to remove the wedges from under the wagon's wheels and were now desperately pushing it to the edge of the road. However, the wagon was rolling slowly... very slowly. Much slower than Sunny had anticipated.

He turned to the tyrant, panicking. The creature, surprised by the sudden weight pressing down on its neck, was already raising its hands to tear the chain apart.

Sunny's eyes widened.

In the next second, Hero crashed into one of the tyrant's legs, throwing it off balance — and buying them some time. Sunny was already running to the wagon, cursing loudly in his mind. Reaching it, he threw himself onto the damp wood alongside Shifty and Scholar, pushing with all the strength left in his rather small, but terribly beaten and enormously exhausted body.

'Roll! Roll, you creaky piece of shit!'

The wagon sped up a little, but was still rather slow in reaching the cliff's edge.

At the same time, the tyrant finally managed to get a hold of the chain tied around its neck, ready to free itself.

Now whether they lived or not was just a question of which thing would happen first.

Chapter 7: Three Slaves And A Hero

'Roll, you creaky piece of shit!'

Sunny pressed himself against the wagon, pushing with all he had. Four powerful oxen that used to pull it were now dead, and instead of them, three tired slaves were trying to do the job. Even with the slope of the road helping them, the speed of the wagon was agonizingly slow. The tyrant, in comparison, was moving much faster.

Pushing Hero back with a deadly swipe of his lower arms, he raised the other two to its neck and tried to grab the chain that was wrapped around it like a noose. However, this time Mountain King's fearsome physique turned into a disadvantage: its long, terrifying bone claws were perfect for tearing flesh apart, but they weren't the best tool for precise manipulations. It took the tyrant some time to get a hold of the chain without slicing its own neck open.

By then, the wagon was nearly at the edge of the cliff.

'Come on! Just a little bit more!'

What followed happened very quickly. The wagon's rear wheels finally slid from the road, hanging over the dark, seemingly bottomless pit beneath. The creature turned, staring expressionlessly at the three slaves with its five milky, dead eyes. The wagon careened, throwing Shifty and Scholar off their feet, and then froze, balanced precariously on its middle axis.

Sunny was the only one left standing. He cast a last glance at the towering monster, and then slammed his shoulder into the front of the wagon, putting all of his weight behind it.

The wagon finally lost its balance and rolled over the edge, scraping its underside deafeningly against the jagged rocks. Sunny fell forward and landed on his knees, narrowly saving himself from tumbling down the cliff with it. Turning his head to the tyrant, he gave it a wicked smile.

Mountain King made a move to lunge at the scrawny slave, but it was already too late. A moment later, the chain on his neck drew tight, and he was yanked back with tremendous force, flying over the edge of the cliff

like a rag doll. The creature fell into the darkness silently, as though refusing to believe that it was defeated by a tiny human.

'Go and die, bastard.' Sunny thought.

Then he took one deep, ragged breath and dropped to the ground, utterly exhausted.

'Is this it? Did I pass the trial?'

He rested on the cold stones, staring at the night sky, and waited for that faintly familiar, but elusive voice to announce his victory. But instead of that, wave after wave of pain that he had earlier chosen to ignore finally started to catch up with his abused body.

Sunny groaned, feeling hurt all over. The skin on his back, slashed by a slaver's whip and pierced by the bone spikes of a newborn larva, especially, was in agony. He was also starting to shiver, once again consumed by the dreadful cold.

'I guess not.'

His thoughts were slow and muddy.

'What else am I supposed to do?'

A dark figure appeared above him. It was Hero, looking calm and as handsome as ever. There were dirt and scratches on his armor, but otherwise, the young soldier appeared to be fine. He extended one arm to Sunny.

"Stand up. You'll freeze to death."

Sunny sighed, accepting that his First Nightmare was not over. Then he clenched his teeth and slowly rose to his feet, ignoring Hero's helping hand.

Around them, there was a scene of utter carnage. Except for the three slaves and Hero, every member of the caravan was dead. Their bodies were littering the ground, horribly maimed or torn into pieces. Here and there, a

repulsive carcass of a larva could be seen. Shadows cast by the bonfire were dancing happily across the stone platform, seemingly unperturbed by this morbid view.

Sunny was also too tired to care.

Shifty and Scholar were already up, looking at Hero with weary apprehension. With or without shackles, they were still slaves, and he was still a slave driver. Noticing their tense gazes, the soldier sighed.

"Come closer to the fire, all of you. We need to warm ourselves and discuss what to do next."

Without waiting for their response, Hero turned around and walked away. After hesitating for a few moments, the slaves followed.

A bit of time later, the four of them were seated around the bonfire, soaking up pleasant heat. Shifty and Scholar were close to each other, maintaining a safe distance from Hero. Sunny sat apart from everyone — not because he had a specific reason to distrust one more than the others, but simply because he didn't like people in general.

Growing up, Sunny was always a misfit. It's not that he had never tried to become close with someone, it's just that he seemed to lack the ability. Like there was an invisible wall between him and other people. If he had to put it in words, Sunny would say that he was born without a small, but important gear in his brain that everyone else seemed to possess.

As a result, he was often baffled and stumped by human behavior, and his attempts to imitate it, however diligent, inevitably fell flat. This strangeness made others uncomfortable. In short, he was a bit different — and if there was one thing people hated, it was those different from them.

Over time, Sunny simply learned to avoid getting too close to anyone and settled comfortably into his outcast role. This habit served him well, since it not only made him self-reliant, but also saved him from being stabbed in the back by shady characters on multiple occasions.

That's why he was not thrilled to share the rest of this Nightmare with three strangers. Instead of trying to start a conversation, Sunny sat quietly by himself, lost in thoughts.

After a few minutes, Hero's voice finally broke the silence:

"Once the sun rises, we will gather whatever food and water we can find and go back down the mountain."

Shifty gave him a defiant look.

"Why should we go back? To be put in chains again?"

The young soldier sighed.

"We can go our separate ways once we leave the mountains. But until then, I'm still responsible for your lives. We can't continue up the road since the way over the mountain pass is long and arduous. Without the supplies that were stored on the wagon, your chances of making it are not high. That's why going back is our best hope."

Scholar opened his mouth, planning to say something, but then thought better of it and remained silent. Shifty cursed, seemingly convinced by Hero's rational words.

"We can't go down."

All three of them turned to Sunny, surprised to hear his voice.

Shifty barked a laugh and glanced at the soldier.

"Don't listen to him, your lordship. This boy is, uh, touched by the gods. He's crazy, is what I'm trying to say."

Hero frowned, looking at the slaves.

"The two of you are only alive thanks to this child's bravery. Aren't you ashamed to badmouth him so?"

Shifty shrugged, showing that he wasn't ashamed at all. The young soldier shook his head.

"I for one would like to hear his reasoning. Tell me, why can't we go down?"

Sunny shifted, uncomfortable in the center of everyone's attention.

"Because the monster isn't dead."

Chapter 8: Nothing At All

"Because the monster isn't dead."

These ominous words hung in the silence. Three pairs of eyes widened, staring right at Sunny.

"Why do you say that?"

After thinking about it, Sunny came to the conclusion that the tyrant was, indeed, still alive. His reasoning was pretty straightforward: he did not hear the Spell congratulating him on slaying the creature after it fell off the cliff. Which meant that it was not slain.

But he couldn't explain that to his companions.

He pointed up.

"The monster jumped from an incredible height to land on this platform. Yet it wasn't harmed at all. Why would it be killed by falling off the platform?"

Neither Hero nor the slaves could find a flaw in his argument.

Sunny continued.

"Which means that it's still alive, somewhere down the mountain. So by going back, we will be delivering ourselves into its maw."

Shifty cursed loudly and crawled closer to the bonfire, staring into the darkness with terror in his eyes. Scholar rubbed his temples, mumbling:

"Of course. Why didn't I realize myself?"

Hero was the most stoic of the three. After thinking it over, he nodded.

"Then we go up and over the mountain pass. But that's not all..."

He glanced in the direction where the tyrant had fallen.

"If the monster is still alive, there is a high possibility that it will return here, and then pursue us. Which means that time is of the essence. We will need to move as soon as the sun rises."

He gestured to the torn bodies littering the platform.

"We can't allow ourselves to rest the whole night anymore. We need to gather supplies now. If there was a chance, I would have liked to give these people at least a humble burial after gathering all that we can from them, but alas, fate has decided otherwise."

Hero rose to his feet and brandished a sharp knife. Shifty tensed up and watched the blade carefully, but then relaxed, seeing that the young soldier showed no sign of aggression.

"Food, water, warm clothes, firewood. That is what we need to find. Let us split up and accomplish one task each."

Then he pointed at himself with the tip of the knife.

"I will carve the oxen carcasses to get us some meat."

Scholar looked around the stone platform — most of it drowning in deep shadows — and grimaced.

"I'll look for firewood."

Shifty also glanced left and right, with a strange gleam in his eyes.

"Then I'll go find us something warm to wear."

Sunny was the last one left. Hero gave him a long look.

"Most of our water was stored on the wagon. But each of my fallen brothers was carrying a flagon. Gather as many as you can find."

Sometime later, far enough from the bonfire to be hidden in the shadows, Sunny was looking for dead soldiers with half a dozen flagons already weighing him down. Shivering in the cold, he finally stumbled on the last broken body clad in leather armor.

The old veteran — the one who had whipped him for trying to accept Hero's flask — was badly injured and dying, but, miraculously, still clinging to life. Horrible wounds were covering his chest and stomach, and he was clearly in a lot of pain.

His time was running out.

Sunny knelt beside the dying soldier and looked him over, searching for the man's flagon.

'What irony,' he thought.

The older man tried to focus his eyes on Sunny and weakly moved his hand, reaching for something. Sunny looked down and noticed a shattered sword lying on the ground not far from them. Curious, he picked it up.

"Are you looking for this? Why? Are you guys like Vikings, longing to die with a weapon in your hands?"

The dying soldier didn't answer, watching the young slave with some unknown, intense emotion in his eyes.

Sunny sighed.

"Well, it might as well do. After all, I promised to watch you die."

With that, he leaned forward and slit the old man's throat with the sharp edge of his broken blade, then threw it away. The soldier twitched, drowning in his own blood. The expression in his eyes changed — was it gratitude? Or hatred? Sunny did not know.

Illusion or not, it was his first time killing a human. Sunny expected to feel guilt or fear, but actually, there was nothing at all. It seemed that, for better

or worse, his cruel upbringing in the real world had prepared him for this moment well.

He sat quietly near the old man, keeping him company on this last journey.

After a while, the Spell's voice came whispering into his ear:

[You have slain a dormant human, name unknown.]

Sunny flinched.

'Oh, right. Killing people is also an achievement, as far as the Spell is concerned. They don't usually show this in webtoons and dramas.'

He registered that fact and put it away. But, as it turned out, the Spell wasn't done speaking.

[You have received a Memory...]

Sunny froze, opening his eyes wide.

'Yes! Come on, give me something good!'

Memories could be anything, from weapons to enchanted items. One received from a dormant-rank enemy wouldn't be too powerful, but it was still a boon: weightless and undetectable, able to be summoned from nothingness with a simple thought, a Memory was incredibly useful. What's more, unlike corporeal things, he would be able to bring it back with him to the real world. The advantage of having something like that back in the outskirts was hard to overestimate.

'A weapon! Give me a sword!'

[... received a Memory: Silver Bell.]

Sunny sighed, disappointed.

'Well, with my luck, what was I expecting?'

Still, this thing was worth investigating. Maybe it had a powerful enchantment, like being able to send out destructive sonic waves or repelling incoming projectiles.

Sunny summoned the runes and concentrated on the words "Silver Bell". Immediately, an image of a small bell appeared in front of his eyes, with a short string of text below.

[Silver Bell: a small memento of a long-lost home, which once brought its owner comfort and joy. Its clear ringing can be heard from miles away.]

'What a piece of crap,' Sunny thought, dejected.

His first Memory turned out to be pretty much useless... like everything else he possessed. He was almost starting to see a theme in how the Spell was treating him.

'No matter.'

Sunny dismissed the runes and then got busy removing the dead man's fur cloak and warm, sturdy leather boots. As an officer, the quality of these clothes was a notch above those of the simple soldiers. After putting them on, the young slave finally felt warm for the first time since the Nightmare began — not considering the short time he had spent near the bonfire.

'Perfect,' he thought.

The cloak was a bit bloodied, but then again, so was Sunny.

He looked around, easily piercing the veil of darkness with his tenebrous eyes. Hero and Scholar were still in the middle of their tasks. Shifty was supposed to be looking for winter clothes, but was greedily pulling rings off the dead men's fingers instead. Unseen to them, Sunny hesitated, considering if he had really thought things through well.

His companions were unreliable. The future was too uncertain. Even the requirements of passing the Nightmare remained a mystery. Any decision he could make would have been a gamble, at best.

Still, he had to make some if he wanted to survive.

Not wasting any more time thinking, Sunny picked up the flagons and sighed.

They spent the rest of the night seating with their backs against the bonfire, staring fearfully into the night. Despite the exhaustion, no one could sleep. The possibility of the tyrant coming back to finish the four survivors off was too frightening.

Only Hero seemed to be fine, calmly sharpening his sword in the bright light of the dancing flames.

The sound of the whetstone scraping against the blade was somehow comforting.

At the break of dawn, when the sun had lazily begun to warm up the air, they loaded themselves with all the supplies they'd managed to gather and set out into the cold.

Sunny looked back, taking in the sight of the stone platform for the last time. He had managed to get past the place where the slave caravan was supposed to perish. What was going to happen next? No one could tell.

Chapter 9: Wishful Thinking | Shadow Slave

There was a problem.

They were planning to follow the road up to the mountain pass and then over it, getting as far away from the scene of the massacre as they could before the night came. However, the road was no more.

At some point during the last months, or maybe even just yesterday, a terrible rockfall occurred, obliterating whole segments of the narrow roadway and making its other parts untraversable. Sunny stood on the precipice of a vast chasm, looking down with no particular expression on his face.

"What do we do now?"

Scholar's voice was muffled by the collar of his scavenged fur cloak. His follower, Shifty, angrily looked around. His gaze stopped at Sunny — a suitable victim to vent his frustration.

"I'll tell you what we need to do! Get rid of some dead weight!"

He eyed Sunny's fine boots and turned to Hero:

"Listen, your lordship. The boy is too weak. He is slowing us down! Plus, he's weird. Doesn't he give you the creeps?"

The young soldier answered with a judgemental frown, but Shifty wasn't done.

"Look! Look how he's glaring at me! I swear to gods, ever since he joined the caravan, nothing had gone right. Maybe the old man was right: the boy is cursed by the Shadow God!"

Sunny struggled to not roll his eyes. It was true that he was unlucky: however, the whole truth was opposite to what Shifty was trying to insinuate. It was not that he had attracted misfortune to the slave caravan; on the contrary, it was because the caravan was doomed to begin with that he had ended up here.

Scholar cleared his throat:

"But I've never said that..."

"Whatever! Shouldn't we get rid of him just in case?! He can't go on for much longer anyway!"

Scholar gave Sunny a strange look. Perhaps Sunny was getting paranoid, but there seemed to be a bit of calculating coldness in the older slave's eyes. Finally, Scholar shook his head.

"Don't be too hasty, my friend. The boy might prove useful later on."

"But..."

Hero finally spoke, putting an end to their quarrel.

"We're not going to leave anyone behind. As for how much longer he'll be able to endure — just worry about yourself."

Shifty clenched his teeth, but then just waved a hand.

"Fine. So what do we do then?"

The four of them looked at the broken road, then down the slope of the mountain, and finally up, where a sheer cliff wall was broken apart by the falling rocks. After a bit of silence, Scholar finally spoke:

"Actually, in the old days, there used to be a path leading to the peak of the mountain. It was sometimes used by pilgrims. Later, the Empire had widened parts of the path and built a proper road on top of it — now leading to the mountain pass instead of the peak, of course."

He looked up.

"The remnants of the original path should still be somewhere above us. If we reach it, we should be able to find our way back to the undamaged section of the road."

Everyone followed his gaze, shifting uncomfortably at the prospect of climbing the treacherous slope. Except for Hero, of course, who remained

as calm as a saint.

Due to the rockfall, the slope wasn't an almost vertical wall anymore, but still, the incline was quite sharp.

Shifty was the first one to speak:

"Climb that? Are you insane?"

Scholar helplessly shrugged.

"Do you have a better idea?"

No one did. After a bit of preparation, they began the ascent. Shifty and Scholar stubbornly carried the weapons they had picked up off the dead soldier's bodies, but Sunny, with some regret, decided to leave his newfound short sword behind. He knew that this climb was going to test the limits of their endurance.

The sword might not have seemed to be that heavy right now, but every extra gram of weight was bound to feel like a ton all too soon. As the weakest member of the group, he was already struggling to keep up, so there wasn't a lot of choice. Shedding a few kilograms of iron was the right thing to do.

Walking up the mountain road with the weight of the supplies on his shoulders was already hard enough, but climbing up the mountain itself turned out to be pure torture. Just half an hour later, he felt like his muscles were going to melt, with his lungs on the verge of imploding.

Clenching his teeth, Sunny continued to move forward and up. He had to constantly remind himself to watch his footing, too. On this unstable, icy slope one misstep was enough to send a man tumbling down to his death.

'Just think about something pleasant,' he thought.

But what happy thoughts could he summon?

Failing to come up with something else, Sunny began to imagine what reward he was going to receive at the end of this trial. The boon of the First Nightmare was the most important thing given to an Awakened by the Spell.

Sure, later trials could provide them with more abilities and vastly improve their power. But it was this first one that determined what role an Awakened would be able to play, how great their potential would be, and what price they would have to pay... not to mention giving them the necessary tools to survive and grow in the Dream Realm.

The main benefit of the First Nightmare's Boon was simple, yet possibly the most important: after completing their trial, Aspirants were bestowed with the ability to perceive, and interact with, Soul Cores. Soul Cores were the basis of one's rank and power. The stronger your Core was, the greater your might would grow.

The same went for Nightmare Creatures, with a deadly caveat that, unlike humans, they could possess multiple cores — a lowly beast had just one, but a tyrant like Mountain King had five. Coincidentally, the only way to improve your Soul Core was to consume Soul Shards scavenged from the corpses of other Dream Realm inhabitants.

That's why Awakened went out of their way to battle powerful Nightmare Creatures despite the risk of death.

The second benefit was less straightforward, but nevertheless vital. After completing the First Nightmare, Aspirants were elevated to the rank of Dreamers — colloquially known as Sleepers — and gained access to the Dream Realm itself. They would enter it on the first winter solstice after passing the trial and remain there until an exit was found, thus becoming fully Awakened. That time between finishing the First Nightmare and entering the Dream Realm was very important, as it was the last chance to train and prepare yourself a person would receive.

In Sunny's case, that time was only about a month, which was as bad as it gets.

And then there was the final benefit, unique to every Aspirant passing the trial... the first Aspect Ability.

This was the "magic power" that elevated Awakened above mundane humans. Aspect Abilities were diverse, unique, and powerful. Some could be categorized into types — like combat, sorcery and utility — but some were simply beyond imagination. Armed with the power of their Abilities, Awakened had been able to save the world from the flood of Nightmare Creatures.

However, that power came with a catch. With their first Ability, every Awakened also received a Flaw, sometimes called the counter. These Flaws were as diverse as Abilities, ranging from comparatively harmless to crippling, or, in some cases, even fatal.

'I wonder what type of Ability a temple slave would get,' Sunny thought, not too optimistic about his prospects. 'The choice of Flaws, on the other hand, seems to be almost limitless. Let's hope my Aspect will evolve at the end of this fiasco. Or, even better, change completely.'

If the Aspirant performed especially well, there was a chance of his given Aspect going through an early evolution. Aspects, just like Soul Cores, had ranks based on potential power and rarity. The lowest rank was called Dormant, followed by Awakened, Ascended, Transcendent, Supreme, Sacred and Divine — although no one has ever seen the last one.

'With the amount of crap it had put me through, the Spell — if it has any conscience — has to give me at least an Awakened Aspect. Right? Or maybe even an Ascended one!'

Finally, there was a tiny possibility of receiving a True Name — something like an honorary title bestowed by the Spell to its favorite Awakened. The name itself had no benefit, but every famous Awakened seemed to have one. It was considered to be the highest mark of excellence. However, the number of people who had managed to get a True Name during their First Nightmare was so small that Sunny didn't even bother thinking about it.

'Who needs excellence? Give me power!'

He cursed, feeling that this attempt at wishful thinking had only made him more depressed and angry.

'Maybe I'm allergic to dreaming.'

An allergy like that would be truly ironic, considering that he was destined to spend half of his remaining life in the Dream Realm — if he even survives long enough to get there, that is.

However, Sunny's mental escapade was not completely useless. Looking up from the slippery rocks under his feet, he noticed that the sun was already considerably lower. Come to think of it, the air also seemed to be much colder.

'At least it helped me pass the time,' Sunny thought.

The night was approaching.

Chapter 10: First Man Down

By the time they decided to stop, Sunny was on the verge of fainting. After hours and hours of traversing the rough mountain slope, his body was almost at its limit. However, to everyone's surprise, Shifty seemed to be doing even worse than him.

The roguish slave's eyes were muddy and unfocused, aimlessly wandering around. His breath was ragged and shallow, as though something was exerting pressure on his lungs. He looked feverish and unwell.

As soon as Hero found a suitable place for a camp, Shifty simply collapsed on the ground. The most unnerving part about all of this was the lack of angry cursing that they had already gotten used to. The slave lay silent and motionless, with only movements of his chest betraying that he was still alive. Several moments later, he uncorked his flagon with a shaky hand and greedily drank a few large gulps.

"Conserve your water," Hero said, a hint of concern somehow finding its way into his usually stoic voice.

Disregarding these words, Shifty drank more, emptying the flagon completely.

Scholar didn't look much better than him. The arduous climb took a heavy toll on the older slave. Despite the unbearable cold, he was sweaty, with bloodshot eyes and a grim expression on his face.

Being the weakest of the three, Sunny had somehow managed to endure the best.

"Can't we just melt the snow once there's no more water?"

Hero gave Scholar a complicated look.

"There might come a time when we won't be able to make a fire, as to not attract unwanted attention."

No one commented, knowing perfectly well whose attention they had to avoid. The memory of Mountain King's horror was still fresh in their minds.

Luckily, today Hero had managed to find a natural alcove in the mountain wall, perched precariously behind a narrow ledge. The fire was well hidden by the rocks, allowing them to enjoy its warmth without the fear of being noticed. No one was in the mood to talk, so they just roasted slices of oxen meat above the flames and ate in silence.

By the time the skies had turned completely black, Shifty and Scholar were already asleep, lost in the thrall of their own nightmares. Hero took out his sword and moved to the edge of the rock outcropping.

"Try to rest, as well. I'll take the first watch."

Sunny gave him a nod and lay down near the fire, dead tired. Falling asleep inside a dream was a new experience for him, but, unexpectedly, it turned out to be quite mundane. As soon as his head touched the ground, his consciousness slipped into darkness.

After what felt like only a second, someone had gently shaken him awake. Groggy and disoriented, Sunny blinked a few times, finally noticing Hero hovering above him.

"These two didn't look too well, so it's better to give them some time to recover. Don't let the flames go out and wake us up once the sun starts to rise. Or if... if the beast appears."

Sunny silently rose and changed places with Hero, who added a couple of logs into the fire and was soon fast asleep.

For a few hours, he was on his own.

The skies were black, with dim stars and a sharp crescent of the newborn moon. However, its light was not enough to pierce the darkness that enveloped the mountain. Only Sunny's eyes seemed to be able to do so.

He sat quietly, looking down the way they came. Despite the fact that they had managed to climb quite high during the previous day, he could still see the distant ribbon of the road. He could even trace it back to the stone platform where the fight with the tyrant had taken place.

The tiny dots littering the stones were the dead bodies of the slaves.

As he was watching them, a dark figure slowly crawled on the platform from beneath the cliff. It stayed motionless for a while and then moved forward, scraping its claws against the ground. Every time a claw hit one of the bodies, the tyrant would grab and bring it to its maw.

The wind brought the muffled sounds of crunching bones to Sunny's ears. He flinched, accidentally pushing a small rock off the ledge. It fell, hit the slope and then rolled down, causing a few more to follow.

The noise of these falling rocks sounded like thunder in the silent night.

Far below, the tyrant suddenly turned its head, looking directly at Sunny.

Sunny froze, petrified. He was scared to make even the tiniest sound. For a while, he even forgot to breathe. The tyrant was staring directly at him, not doing anything.

A few torturous seconds passed, each feeling like an eternity. Then the tyrant calmly turned away and continued to devour dead slaves, as though he had not seen Sunny at all.

'It's blind,' Sunny suddenly understood.

He inhaled, watching Mountain King with widened eyes. It was true. The creature could not see.

Looking back at everything that had happened earlier, he grew more and more certain of his guess. Those milky, expressionless eyes. Come to think of it, he never saw the tyrant moving them at all. And back when Sunny was pushing the wagon off the cliff, the tyrant only reacted after the wagon's had started to fall, scraping loudly against the rocks.

Of course! It was all making sense now.

At the break of dawn, Sunny had woken the others up. Hero had hoped that a full night's rest would do Shifty and Scholar some good, but his hopes were crushed. Somehow, the two slaves looked even worse than before. It was as though yesterday's climb had overstrained Scholar too much.

However, Shifty's condition could not be explained by simple overexertion. He was deadly pale and shaky, with half-conscious eyes and a lost look on his face.

"What's wrong with him?"

Scholar, who himself was not doing very well, helplessly shook his head.

"It might be the mountain sickness. It affects different people differently."

His voice sounded raspy and weak.

"I'm fine, assholes. Get out of my face."

Shifty had trouble forming full sentences, but still insisted that he was alright.

Hero frowned and then took most of the supplies the defiant slave was supposed to carry before adding them to his own load. After hesitating a little, he gave some to Sunny, too.

"Did anything happen while we were asleep?"

Sunny stared at him for a few seconds.

"The monster ate the dead."

The young soldier's frown deepened.

"How do you know?"

"I heard it."

Hero moved to the edge and looked down, trying to make out the distant stone platform. After a minute or so, he clenched his jaw, showing signs of uncertainty for the first time.

"Then we'll have to move faster. If the creature is finished with all the bodies, it will come for us next. We need to find that old path before nightfall."

Frightened and dejected, they set out again and continued to climb. Sunny was slowly dying under the weight of the added load. Thankfully, Shifty and Scholar had already drunk most of the water, lightening it a little.

'This is hell,' he thought.

They climbed higher, and higher, and higher. The sun was climbing with them, slowly approaching the zenith. There was no talking, no laughs, only strained breathing. Each of the four survivors was concentrated on his own steps and footing.

However, Shifty was falling farther and farther behind. His strength was abandoning him.

And then, at some point, Sunny heard a desperate scream. Turning around, he only had time to see a panic-stricken face. Then Shifty fell backward, his foot slipping on an ice-covered rock. He hit the ground hard and rolled down, still trying to grab onto something.

But it was too late.

Frozen in place and powerless, they could only watch as his body tumbled down the slope, leaving bloody marks on the rocks. With each second, Shifty looked less like a man and more like a rag doll.

A handful of moments later, he finally came to a halt, hitting the top of a large, protruding stone in a pile of broken flesh.

Shifty was dead.

Chapter 11: Crossroads | Shadow Slave

The three of them stood motionless, looking down in uneasy silence. What happened to Shifty didn't come as a shock, but it was still a hard thing to digest. An ominous feeling settled in their hearts — seeing the broken body of their companion, it was too easy to imagine one of them sharing the same fate.

No one knew what to say.

After a minute or so, Scholar finally sighed.

"It's a good thing that you took most of the supplies he had been carrying."

'A bit heartless, but not wrong,' Sunny thought, giving the older slave a careful look.

Scholar frowned, realizing that his mask of a kind-hearted gentleman had slipped for a second, and hurriedly added in a somber tone:

"May you rest in peace, my friend."

'Wow. What a performance.'

Actually, Sunny had not believed in his benevolent act for a second. Every kid from the outskirts knew that people who acted kind for no reason were the ones to be most wary of. They were either fools or monsters. Scholar didn't seem like a fool, so Sunny became cautious of him from the moment they met.

He got this far by being a mistrustful cynic, and there was no reason to change now.

"We have to go." Hero said, casting one last look down.

His voice was even, but Sunny could feel a well of emotion behind it. He just couldn't tell what that emotion was.

Scholar sighed and turned away, too. Sunny stared at the bloodied rocks for a few more seconds.

'Why do I feel so guilty?' he thought, bewildered by this unexpected reaction. 'He got what he deserved.'

A little unsettled, Sunny turned around and followed his two remaining companions.

Just like that, they left Shifty behind and continued to climb.

At this altitude, traversing the mountain was getting harder and harder. The wind was slamming into them with enough force to throw a person off-balance if they were not careful, making every step seem like a gamble. The air was becoming too thin to breathe. Due to the lack of oxygen, Sunny was starting to feel dizzy and nauseated.

It was as though they were all slowly suffocating.

Altitude sickness was not something one could overcome with effort. It was subtle and overbearing at the same time, affecting the strong and the weak with no regard to their fitness and endurance. If his luck was bad, an elite athlete could succumb to it faster than a random passerby.

It was just a question of your body's innate aptitude and adaptability. Lucky ones were able to get over it after experiencing mild symptoms. The others were sometimes crippled for days or weeks, suffering from all kinds of torturous side effects. Some even died.

As though all that wasn't bad enough, it was getting colder, too. The warm clothes and fur weren't enough to keep the chill at bay anymore. Sunny felt simultaneously feverish and freezing, cursing every decision he had made in his life to end up here, on the endless icy slope.

This mountain was not a place for humans.

And yet they had to go on.

A few hours passed. Despite everything, the three survivors continued to struggle forward, slowly moving higher and higher. Wherever that old path

Scholar had talked about was, by now, it couldn't have been far. At least that's what Sunny was hoping for.

But at some point, he started to doubt if the path even existed. Maybe the older slave lied. Maybe the path was long ago destroyed by ravages of time. Maybe they had already missed it without even noticing.

Just as he was about to fall into despair, they finally found it.

It was weathered and narrow, barely enough for two people to walk side by side. The path wasn't paved, but rather cut from the black rock by some unknown tool or magic, winding its way up the mountain like a tail of a sleeping dragon. Here and there, it was hidden beneath the snow. But most importantly, it was flat. Sunny had never been that happy to see something flat in his life.

Without saying a word, Scholar dropped his rucksack and sat down. He was deathly pale, gasping for air like a fish out of water. Despite that, there was a slight grin on his face.

"Told you."

Hero gave him a nod and looked around. A few seconds later, he turned back to the triumphant slave:

"Stand up. It's not time to rest yet."

Scholar blinked a few times, then glanced at him with pleading eyes.

"Just... just give me a few minutes."

The young soldier was going to retort, but Sunny suddenly put a hand on his shoulder. Hero turned to face him.

"What is it?"

"It's gone."

"What is gone?"

Sunny gestured down, back the way they came.

"Shifty's body. It's gone."

Hero stared at him for a few moments, clearly failing to understand what Sunny was trying to say.

'Oh, right. They don't know that Shifty's name is Shifty. Ahem. Awkward.'

He wanted to explain, but both Scholar and Hero seemed to have grasped his meaning. Simultaneously, they moved to the edge of the stone path and looked down, trying to spot the place where Shifty had met his end.

Indeed, the splattering of blood could still be seen on the jagged rocks, but the corpse itself was nowhere to be found.

Scholar flinched back and crawled as far away from the edge as he could. The young soldier also backed away, instinctively grabbing the handle of his sword. The three of them exchanged tense looks, clearly understanding the implication of Shifty's disappearance.

"It's the monster," Scholar said, even paler than before. "It's following us."

Hero gritted his teeth.

"You are right. And if it is that close, we will inevitably be forced to fight it soon."

The idea of fighting the tyrant was as frightening as it was preposterous. He might as well have said that they will all be dead soon. The truth of it was painfully clear to both Sunny and Scholar.

But the older slave, surprisingly, did not look panicked. Instead, he lowered his gaze and quietly said:

"Not necessarily."

Hero and Sunny turned to him, all ears. The young soldier raised an eyebrow.

"Explain?"

'Here it comes.'

Scholar sighed.

"The beast had traced us this far in just a day. That means that there are two most probable possibilities. Either it is smart enough to realize where we are going, or it is following the scent of blood."

After a bit of thinking, Hero nodded, agreeing with this logic. The older slave smiled slightly and continued.

"Whether it is one or another, we can throw him off our trail and buy some time."

"How do we do that?"

Despite the urgency in Hero's voice, Scholar hesitated and remained silent.

"Why are you not answering? Speak!"

The older slave sighed again and slowly, as though against his will, answered. Sunny was waiting for this moment for a while now.

"We'll just have to... make the boy bleed. Drag him down the path, then leave him there as bait and go up instead. His sacrifice will save our lives."

'Right on time.'

If Sunny wasn't mad — and scared witless, of course — he would have smiled. His judgment, it seems, was eerily on point. Affirmation was always nice... but not in the situation where being right also meant potentially being used as monster bait.

He remembered the words Scholar had spoken back when Shifty was campaigning to have Sunny killed — "Don't be too hasty, my friend. The boy might prove useful later on." These words, which had sounded benevolent then, now turned out to hide a much more sinister meaning.

'What a bastard!'

Now it all depended on whether or not Hero would decide to follow through with Scholar's plan.

The young soldier blinked, astonished.

"What do you mean, make him bleed?"

Scholar shook his head.

"It's simple, really. If the monster knows where we are going, we have no choice but to abandon our plans to reach the mountain pass and go over the peak of the mountain instead. If the monster is following the scent of blood, we have to use one of us as bait to mislead it."

He paused.

"Only by leaving a bleeding man further down the path can we reliably avoid the pursuit no matter how it is tracking us."

Hero stood motionless, his eyes jumping between Scholar and Sunny. After a few seconds, he asked:

"How can you bring yourself to propose something so vile?"

The older slave masterfully pretended to look aggrieved and somber.

"Of course, it pains me! But if we do nothing, all three of us will die. This way, at least, the boy's death will save two lives. The gods will reward him for his sacrifice!"

'Gee, what a silver tongue. I'm almost convinced myself.'

The young soldier opened his mouth, then closed it again, hesitating.

Sunny was silently watching the other two survivors, measuring his chances of coming on top in a fight. Scholar was already halfway to being a corpse,

so overpowering him would not be a problem. Hero, however... Hero presented an obstacle.

Chapter 12: The Smell Of Blood

Right now, that obstacle was looking down, avoiding Sunny's gaze. His hand was resting on the sword handle. As always, the young slave had no idea about what was going on inside Hero's perfectly shaped head.

The uncertainty was making him nervous.

Finally, after some time had passed, the soldier spoke:

"I have only one question."

Both Sunny and Scholar stared at him while holding their breaths.

"Yes?"

"You said that one of us must be sacrificed to save the other two. Why him? From what I see, you are far closer to the grave."

'A great question! I was just about to ask it myself.'

Sunny turned to the older slave, trying very hard to suppress a mocking grin. But to his dismay, Scholar had an answer ready.

"Before the first attack, he was already bleeding because of your senior's whip. During the attack, he was drenched in the blood of a fellow slave. His cloak, too, was soaked in it when the previous owner died. The boy already reeks of blood. Keeping him alive will put us in danger. That's why he is the best choice."

The grin died before reaching Sunny's face.

'Curse you and your big brain!'

Scholar's reasoning was appallingly solid. Hero listened, his expression growing darker with each word. Finally, he looked at Sunny, a dangerous light shining in his eyes.

"That is true."

Sunny felt his mouth getting dry. Cold sweat was running down his spine. He tensed, ready to act...

But at that moment, Hero smiled.

"Your logic is almost unassailable," he said, unsheathing the sword.

"However, you failed to account for one thing."

Scholar raised an eyebrow, trying to hide his own nervousness.

"What might that be?"

The young soldier turned to face him, the smile disappearing from his face. Now, he was radiating thick, practically palpable killing intent.

"It's that I know who you are, Your Grace. I also know what you've done, and how you ended up a slave. Just one of the revolting crimes you have committed would be enough to make me want to kill you. So if there is someone among us who deserves to be sacrificed... it's you."

Scholar's eyes widened.

"But... but the smell of blood!"

"Don't worry about it. I'll make you bleed enough to overpower whatever residual scent the boy carries."

It all happened so fast that Sunny barely had time to react. Hero lunged forward with a speed that seemed almost inhuman. A moment later, Scholar was shrieking on the ground, his leg broken with one strike from the flat side of the young soldier's sword. Not giving him an opportunity to recover, Hero stomped on his other leg, and a sickening sound of shattering bones could be clearly heard. The shriek turned into a sobbing howl.

Just like that, Scholar was done for.

The brutality of Hero's actions was in such stark contrast with his usually graceful demeanor that Sunny felt blood turning to ice in his veins. This was... scary.

The soldier gave him a calm look and said in a placid tone:

"Wait for me here."

Then he grabbed the older slave and dragged him down the path, soon disappearing behind a rock outcropping. After a few minutes, terrible screams could be heard echoing through the wind.

Sunny was left alone, trembling.

'Crap! This is... this is too much!'

He still couldn't believe how sudden Scholar's demise came to be. And how ruthless it was.

Some time later, Hero was back, acting as though nothing had happened. But it was exactly that normalcy that unnerved Sunny the most.

After sorting through the contents of Scholar's rucksack and throwing most of the firewood out, the young soldier put it over his shoulder and nonchalantly turned to the young slave:

"Let's go. We need to hurry."

Not knowing what to say, Sunny gave him a nod and headed forward.

Now there were only two of them left.

It was sort of stupid, but Sunny suddenly felt lonesome.

Walking on the stone path was much easier than scaling the mountain wall. He even had time for unnecessary thoughts. A strange feeling of melancholy descended on Sunny... somehow, he began to feel that the end of this nightmare, whatever it might be, was not far off now.

They walked in silence for some time before Hero spoke.

"Don't feel guilty about what happened. It's not your fault. The decision was mine, and mine alone."

The young soldier was a few steps ahead, so Sunny couldn't see his face.

"Besides, if you knew this man's sins... actually, it's better that you don't. Just trust me when I say that killing him was an act of justice."

'I wonder which one of us feels guilty.'

These people... always trying to rationalize their actions, always desperate to maintain an illusion of righteousness even while doing most foul things. Sunny hated the hypocrisy.

Not getting an answer, Hero chuckled.

"You don't like to talk, do you? Well, fair enough. Silence is gold."

They didn't speak again after that, each preoccupied with their own thoughts.

The sun was setting, painting the world into a million shades of crimson. This high up, the air was clean and crisp, pierced by streams of scarlet light. Below them, a sea of maroon clouds was slowly rolling past the mountain. The stars and the moon had begun to reveal themselves in the vermillion sky.

It was quite beautiful.

However, Sunny could only think about how cold it was going to be once the sun fully disappears.

Before that happened, Hero had found them a shelter. Not far from the path, hidden behind some tall rocks, was a narrow crevice that extended into the slope of the mountain. Happy to be safe from the piercing wind, they explored the crevice and ended up in a small, well-concealed cave.

Sunny made a move to unbundle some firewood, but Hero stopped him with a shake of his head.

"Today we will camp without making a fire. The beast is too close."

Camping without the warm flames to keep them company was not going to be pleasant, but at least they weren't going to freeze to death inside the cave. In any case, the alternative was too frightening.

Sunny sat down, putting his back against the cave's wall. Hero settled opposite of him, looking downcast and thoughtful.

He was obviously in a strange mood. If nothing else, it was apparent from the fact that today, for the first time, the young soldier had failed to care for his sword after making camp.

Soon, the sun was gone, and their small cave became completely dark. Sunny, of course, could still see perfectly well; Hero, on the other hand, was now completely blind.

In the darkness, his handsome face looked noble and, for some reason, sorrowful. Sunny studied it, not willing to fall asleep.

After a while, Hero suddenly spoke in a quiet voice:

"You know, it's strange. Usually, I can feel someone's presence even in absolute darkness. But with you, there's nothing. It's like you are just one of the shadows."

With only silence to answer him, he smiled.

"Are you asleep?"

The question echoed in the darkness. Sunny, who had never spoken with Hero unless there was an urgent need to, and even then only using a few words at best, felt like there was a strange intimacy between them now. That's why he decided to talk. Maybe the darkness gave him courage.

Besides, there was an occasion.

"Why? Are you waiting for me to fall asleep before you kill me? Or will you do it in the morning?"

Chapter 13: Moment Of Truth

The smile froze on Hero's face. He lowered his head, as though in shame. After a minute or so passed, shrouded in heavy silence, he finally answered.

"Yes. I thought that if I do it when you sleep, you won't have to suffer."

Unseen to him, a bitter grin appeared on Sunny's face.

A long sigh escaped from the young soldier's lips. He rested his back against the cave's wall, still not looking up.

"I don't expect you to forgive me. This sin, too, will be mine to bear. But, please, if you can... find it in your heart to understand. If things were different, I would have gladly faced that monster to let you escape. But my life... does not belong to me alone. There is an unencompassable duty I am sworn to fulfill. Until it's done, I cannot allow myself to die."

Sunny laughed.

"You people... Look at you! Planning to kill me and still insisting on having a good excuse. How very convenient! I really hate hypocrites like you the most. Why don't you be honest for once? Don't give me that crap... just say it! I'm going to kill you because it's easy. I'm going to kill you because I want to survive."

Hero closed his eyes, his face full of sadness.

"I'm sorry. I knew you wouldn't be able to understand."

"What's there to understand?"

Sunny leaned forward, anger coursing through his veins.

"Tell me. Why do I have to die?"

The young soldier finally looked up. Even though he couldn't see in the dark, he turned his face in the direction of Sunny's voice.

"That man was a villain... but he was also right. The scent of blood is too heavy on you. It will attract the beast."

"You can just let me go, you know. We'll part ways. After that whether or not the monster finds me won't be your problem."

Hero shook his head.

"Dying in that creature's maw... is too cruel a fate. It's better if I do it myself. You are my responsibility, after all."

"How noble of you."

Sunny leaned back, dejected. After a short while, he quietly said:

"You know... when I just came here, I was ready to die. After all, in this whole world — two worlds, actually — there's not a single soul who cares whether I live or die. When I'm gone, no one will be sad. No one will even remember that I existed."

There was a forlorn look on his face. A moment later, however, it was gone, replaced by mirth.

"But then I changed my mind. Somewhere along the way, I decided to survive. I must survive, no matter what."

Hero gave him a thoughtful look.

"To live a life worth remembering?"

Sunny grinned. A dark gleam appeared in his eyes.

"No. To spite you all."

The young soldier was silent for a few moments, then nodded, accepting this answer. He rose to his feet.

"Don't worry. I'll make it quick."

"Aren't you overly confident? What makes you think you'll be able to kill me? Maybe I'll kill you instead."

Hero shook his head.

"I doubt that."

... But in the next second, he staggered and fell on one knee. The young man's face turned deathly pale, and with a pained groan, he suddenly vomited blood.

A satisfied smile appeared on Sunny's face.

"Finally."

"Finally."

Hero was standing on his knees, the lower part of his face covered in blood. Astonished, he was staring at his hands, trying to understand what had happened to him.

"What... what magic is this?"

With wide eyes and a pale face, he turned to Sunny.

"Was... was that thief right? Did you put the curse of the Shadow God on us?"

Sunny sighed.

"I wish that I had the ability to throw divine curses around, but no. To tell you the truth, I don't have any abilities at all."

"Then.. how?"

The young slave shrugged.

"That's why I poisoned you all."

Hero flinched, trying to comprehend his words.

"What?"

"After the tyrant first attacked, you send me to search for water. While gathering flagons from the dead soldiers, I squeezed Bloodbane juice into each one — except my own, of course. Not enough to taste it, but enough to slowly kill anyone who would drink from them."

The soldier gritted his teeth, struggling through pain. A sudden realization appeared on his face.

"So that's why... the other two were in such bad shape."

Sunny nodded.

"Shifty drank the most, so his condition worsened the fastest. Scholar was also not long for this world, but you finished him off before the poison could. Yourself, however... it was as though Bloodbane had no effect on you at all. I was really starting to get worried."

Hero's face darkened.

"I see... I understand."

He thought about something, then looked at Sunny with surprise.

"But... but back then you didn't know... that we will turn on you."

Sunny just laughed.

"Oh, please. It was obvious. Shifty was the kind of man who would kill for a pair of boots. Scholar was like a wolf in sheep's clothing. People are selfish and cruel in the best of situations — was I supposed to believe that those two weren't going to do something terrible to me when faced with certain death?"

Hero spat more blood.

"Then... what about me?"

"You?" A disdainful expression appeared on Sunny's face. "You are the worst of them."

"Why?"

Sunny looked at him and leaned forward.

"I might have not learned much in my short life, but I do know one thing," he said, all traces of humor gone from his voice.

Now there was only cold, callous contempt. Sunny's face hardened as he spat:

"There is nothing more pathetic than a slave who begins to trust his slaver."

Hearing these words, Hero lowered his head.

"I see."

Then, suddenly, he laughed.

"You... you are a wicked little shit, aren't you?"

Sunny rolled his eyes.

"There's no need to be rude."

But Hero wasn't listening to him.

"Good. This is good. My conscience will be clearer."

The young slave sighed in irritation.

"What are you mumbling about? Just die already."

Hero chuckled and suddenly pierced him with a stare. Somehow, he didn't look so sick anymore.

"You see, that plan would have worked if I was a normal human. But, alas, my Soul Core has Awakened long ago. I've slain countless enemies and absorbed their power. Bloodbane poison, unpleasant as it might be, can never kill me."

'Crap!'

Sunny turned around and tried to run away, but it was already too late. Something hit him in the back, sending his body crashing into the rock wall. With a scream, he felt a sharp pain piercing his left side. Rolling out of the cave, Sunny clutched his chest, scrambled back onto his feet and ran, trying to escape the narrow crevice.

He managed to reach the old path, finally being able to see the stars and the pale moon shining brightly in the night sky. But it was as far as he was able to get.

"Stop."

As the cold voice sounded behind him, Sunny froze. If Hero really had an Awakened Soul Core, he had no chances of getting away from him. In a fight, he had no chances at all.

"Turn around."

The young slave obediently turned, holding his hands up. He looked at Hero, who was wiping the blood off his face with a displeased look in his eyes. The two of them stared at each other, shivering in the murderous cold.

"Was it worth it? No matter. Despite it all, I will be true to my promise. I'll make it quick."

The soldier unsheathed his sword.

"Do you have any last words?"

Sunny did not answer.

However, a small silver bell suddenly appeared in his hand.

Hero frowned.

"Where were you hiding that thing?"

Sunny shook the bell. A beautiful, clear ringing sound flowed over the mountain, filling the night with an enchanting melody.

"What are you doing?! Stop!"

The young slave dutifully stopped.

"What was..."

Right under Hero's bewildered eyes, the silver bell disappeared into thin air. He looked at Sunny, stumped and suspicious.

"Tell me! What did you just do?"

But Sunny didn't answer. In fact, he hadn't said a single word ever since escaping the cave. Right now, he wasn't even breathing.

Hero, on the other hand, continued to speak.

"Tell me right now or you will regret it."

He scowled.

"Why are you not saying anything?"

The shivering boy just stared at him, completely silent.

No... he was staring into the darkness behind him.

Hero's eyes widened.

"What..."

Chapter 14: Child Of Shadows

Sunny had no choice but to resort to one last, desperate gamble.

He had no chance against the enemy in a direct confrontation, at least not without an advantage. Bloodbane poison was supposed to be his hidden card, but turned out to be nearly useless. Being able to see in the dark did not help that much, too: somehow, Hero was able to perceive their surroundings even without any light.

Whether he was using his sense of hearing or some magical ability, Sunny did not know — not that it mattered now that they had left the cave and were standing under the moonlit sky.

Now he had only one advantage left. The fact that he knew that the tyrant was blind, and Hero did not. Acting on that knowledge, however, was easier said than done.

But what else could he do?

That's why he tried to stay as quiet as possible and rang the silver bell. If the description did not lie, its ringing could be heard from miles away. Surely, the tyrant was going to hear it, too.

Now Sunny only had to stay silent, stall for time and hope that the monster would come. As he did so, Hero's bewilderment slowly turned into anger.

"Tell me right now or you will regret it."

His voice was quite threatening, but still, the young slave did not answer. He just shivered in the cold and tried not to moan despite the pulsing pain in his chest.

"Why are you not answering?"

But Sunny did not dare to answer. He held his breath and watched, horrified, as the familiar colossal figure appeared behind Hero. His lungs were on fire, and his heart was beating like crazy. It was beating so loud that he was even afraid that the blind tyrant would hear it.

But, of course, it couldn't be louder than Hero's voice, who was still talking, turning himself into the only source of noise on this mountain.

At the last second, a hint of understanding appeared in the young soldier's eyes. He began to turn around, his sword rising with lightning speed.

But it was too late.

A massive hand appeared from the darkness and caught him into an iron grip. The bone claws scraped against the armor, pulling it apart. Mountain King dragged Hero back, paying little attention to the sword biting into its wrist. Viscous saliva was streaming from its opened maw.

Petrified by fear, Sunny slowly turned his back to them and took a couple of steps up the old, winding path. Then he darted away, running as fast as he could.

Behind him, a desperate scream tore apart the silent night. Then a hungry roar followed. It seemed that Hero wasn't going down without a fight, even though his fate was already sealed.

But Sunny didn't care. He was running away, climbing higher and higher.

"I'm sorry, Hero," he thought. "I did say that I will watch you die... but, as you know, I am a liar. So go and die on your own..."

A lonesome dark mountain stood tall against the raging winds.

Jagged and proud, it dwarfed other peaks of the mountain chain, cutting the night sky with its sharp edges. A radiant moon bathed its slopes in the ghostly light.

Under that light, a young man with pale skin and black hair reached the peak of the mountain. However, his looks didn't match the magnificence of the scene: wounded and staggering, he looked pathetic and weak.

The young man looked like a walking corpse.

His coarse tunic and cloak were torn and smeared with blood. His sunken eyes were cloudy and lifeless. His body was bruised, beaten and cut. There were specks of bloody foam on his lips.

He was hunched over, cradling the left side of his chest. Each step caused him to moan, ragged breath barely escaping through gritted teeth.

Sunny was hurting all over. But most of all, he was cold.

So, so cold.

He just wanted to lie down in the snow and fall asleep.

But instead, he continued walking. Because he believed that the Nightmare will be over once he reaches the peak.

Step. Step. Another step.

Finally, he had made it.

At the highest point of the mountain, a vast expanse of flat rock was covered with snow. In the center of it, illuminated by moonlight, stood a magnificent temple. Its colossal columns and walls were cut from black marble, with exquisite reliefs decorating the stygian pediment and broad frieze. Beautiful and awesome, it looked like a palace of a dark god.

At least it did once. Now, the temple was in ruins: fractures and cracks marred the black stones, parts of the roof had collapsed, letting in ice and snow. Its tall gates were broken, as if smashed into pieces by a hand of a giant.

Still, Sunny was satisfied.

"Found you," he said in a hoarse voice.

Gathering the last of his strength, the young slave slowly limped in the direction of the ruined temple. His thoughts were muddled and confused.

'See this, Hero?' he thought, forgetting for a second that Hero was already dead. 'I've made it. You were strong and ruthless, and I was weak and timid. Yet now you are a corpse, and I am still alive. Isn't it funny?'

He stumbled and groaned, feeling the edges of his broken ribs cutting deeper into his lungs. Blood was dripping from his mouth. Dead or not, Hero had gotten him good with that single strike.

'Actually, it's not. What do any of you even know about being ruthless? Poor fools. In the world where I come from, people had thousands of years to turn cruelty into an art. And as someone on the receiving end of all that cruelty... don't you think I would know more about being vicious than you ever could?'

He was getting closer to the temple.

'Truth be told, you never stood a chance... wait. What was I thinking about?'

A moment later, he had already forgotten. There was only pain, the dark temple, and the overpowering desire to sleep.

'Don't fall for it. It's just hypothermia. If you fall asleep, you'll die.'

Finally, Sunny reached the steps of the black temple. He started to climb them, not noticing thousands of bones that were scattered around. These bones once belonged to humans and monsters both. All of them were killed by the invisible guardians still lingering around the temple.

As Sunny was climbing the steps, one of the shapeless guardians approached him. It was ready to snuff out the spark of life that was burning weakly in the defiler's chest, but then stopped, sensing a faint, strangely familiar scent coming from his soul. The scent of divinity. Sorrowful and lonesome, the guardian moved aside, letting Sunny pass.

Oblivious, he entered the temple.

Sunny found himself in a grandiose hall. Cascades of moonlight were falling through the holes in the partially collapsed roof. Deep shadows were surrounding these circles of silver light, not daring to touch them. The floor was covered in snow and ice.

At the far end of the hall, a large altar was cut from a single piece of black marble. It was the only thing inside the temple untouched by snow. Forgetting why he came here, Sunny headed for the altar.

He just wanted to sleep.

The altar was dry, clean, and as wide as a bed. Sunny climbed on it and lay down.

It seemed like he was going to die.

He was okay with it.

Sunny tried to close his eyes, but was stopped by a sudden noise coming from the direction of the temple's entrance. He turned his head to look, not even a little bit curious. What he saw would have sent chills running down his spine if he wasn't so cold, tired and indifferent.

Mountain King was standing there, looking at him with its five blind eyes. He was still massive, terrifying and revolting. Worm-like shapes were still moving frantically under its skin. It was sniffing the air, salivating.

Then it opened its maw and moved forward, slowly approaching the altar.

'What an ugly bastard,' Sunny thought and suddenly clutched his chest, convulsing in a fit of torturous coughing.

Bloody foam flew from his mouth and fell on the altar. However, the black marble soon absorbed it.

A second later, it was as pristine as it was before.

The tyrant was just about to reach Sunny. It was already stretching its hands to grab him.

'I guess this is the end,' he thought, resigned to his fate.

But at the last second, suddenly, the voice of the Spell resounded in the dark temple.

[You have offered yourself as a sacrifice to the gods.]

[The gods are dead, and can not hear you.]

[Your soul bears the mark of divinity.]

[You are a temple slave.]

[Shadow God stirs in his eternal slumber.]

[He sends a blessing from beyond the grave.]

[Child of Shadows, receive your blessing!]

Under Sunny's astonished eyes, the shadows crowding the great hall suddenly moved, as though coming alive. Tentacles of darkness surged forward, entangling Mountain King's arms and legs. The mighty tyrant struggled, trying to get free.

But how could it resist the power of a god?

The shadows dragged Mountain King back, pulling in different directions. The tyrant opened its maw, and a furious howl escaped it.

The next second, its body ruptured, torn apart into pieces.

Blood, viscera and severed limbs fell on the floor in a crimson torrent. Just like that, the horrible creature was dead.

Sunny blinked.

Once again, he was alone in the ruined temple. The great hall was dark and silent.

And then the Spell whispered:

[You have slain an awakened tyrant, Mountain King.]

[Wake up, Sunless! Your nightmare is over.]

[Prepare for appraisal...]

Chapter 15: Shadow Slave | Shadow Slave

[Prepare for appraisal...]

Sunny found himself in a space between dream and reality. It was an endless black void illuminated by a myriad of stars. Between those stars, countless strings of silver light were woven into a beautiful and inconceivably complex net, forming various nexuses and constellations. It was truly breathtaking.

Somehow, Sunny understood that he was seeing the inner workings of the Nightmare Spell. He also couldn't help but think that it looked a lot like the celestial equivalent of a neural network. If so... was the Spell alive?

This was a question that countless people had been asking themselves for the past few decades. The best answer they had come up with was that there was no way to know. The Spell was neither alive nor dead; neither sentient nor mindless.

It was more of a function than a creature.

But Sunny was in no mood to ponder philosophical questions. He was eagerly awaiting his boon.

The Spell was still appraising his performance. However, the first reward had nothing to do with it.

[You have received a Memory: Puppeteer's Shroud]

'Yes!'

Sunny felt incredibly elated. He was almost ready to do a happy dance. That Memory belonged to Mountain King, who was an awakened tyrant — which meant that the Memory itself was of the Awakened rank. Getting it was a stroke of incredible luck!

There were seven ranks to everything in the Spell. These ranks were, in order of growing power: Dormant, Awakened, Ascended, Transcendent, Supreme, Sacred and Divine (with the exclusion of Nightmare Creatures,

who were ranked as Dormant, Awakened, Fallen, Corrupted, Great, Cursed and Unholy).

From the Spell's point of view, Sunny was a dormant human. Having a Memory of a higher rank than his own soul core would be of great help once he enters the Dream Realm. The power gap between different ranks simply could not be overestimated.

He wanted to take a look at the Puppeteer's Shroud, but there was no more time. The Spell was done with its appraisal.

Here in the void, its voice didn't sound subtle and familiar anymore. Rather, it seemed like the universe itself was speaking. Sunny held his breath, listening.

[Aspirant! Your trial is over.]

[A nameless slave ascended the Black Mountain. Both heroes and monsters fell by his hand. Unbroken, he entered the ruined temple of a long-forgotten god and spilled his blood on the sacred altar. The gods were dead, and yet they listened.]

[You have defeated a dormant beast: Mountain King's Larva.]

[You have defeated three dormant humans, names unknown.]

[You have defeated an awakened human: Auro of the Nine.]

[You have defeated an awakened tyrant: Mountain King.]

[You have received the Shadow God's blessing.]

[You have achieved the impossible!]

[Final appraisal: glorious. Your treachery truly knows no bounds.]

That final part was not really necessary, as far as Sunny was concerned, but he was still pretty satisfied with the praise from the Spell. He felt like his

chances of evolving his Aspect to an Awakened, or even Ascended one were pretty high.

His overall power was still dependent on the rank of his soul core, which would remain dormant until much later, but the rank of the Aspect itself would do wonders for his overall potential.

[Dreamer Sunless, receive your boon!]

He was an Aspirant no more. Sunny grinned.

[You have been bestowed a True Name: Lost from Light.]

His jaw dropped. A true name! He had received a true name! Never in his wildest dreams did Sunny dream of becoming one of the chosen few to accomplish such feat — and in his very first Nightmare to boot! Not even all of the Saints could boast of having one. He was an elite now, a bonafide cream of the crop! He was going to be rich!

But the rewards kept coming.

[Your Aspect is ready to evolve. Evolve Aspect?]

'What kind of a question is that?'

Sunny crossed his fingers and said "yes".

[Dormant Aspect Temple Slave is evolving...]

[New Aspect acquired.]

[Aspect Rank: Divine.]

Sunny fell over.

[Aspect Name: Shadow Slave.]

'Divine... it's Divine.'

Sunny was standing on his knees, stupefied. The shock was so great that for a second there he lost all control over his limbs and fell.

'It said "divine"... right?'

He raised a trembling hand and rubbed his eyes, making sure that he was awake. Or rather conscious, since, technically, he was still sleeping in the underground vault of the police station.

Confused by all this terminology, Sunny silently summoned the runes and found the lines describing his aspect.

Aspect: [Shadow Slave].

Aspect Rank: Divine.

Aspect Description: [You are a miraculous shadow left behind by a dead god. As a divine shadow, you possess plenty of strange and wondrous powers. However, your existence is empty and lonesome; you mourn the passing of your former master and long to find a new one.]

Innate Ability: [Shadow Bond].

Ability Description: [Find a worthy master and let them know your True Name. Once they recite it out loud, you will be bound to their will, unable to disobey any command. It is improper for a shadow, let alone a divine one, to walk around without a master.]

That was... a lot to digest.

First of all, Sunny felt his heart beating faster. He heard it right! All the suffering and horror he had experienced in the First Nightmare paid off in the end. A divine Aspect, he had received a divine Aspect! Anything above Awakened was rare and immensely valuable!

People with Ascended Aspects were rare enough to be fought over by various factions. The factions themselves were built around singular

powerhouses with Transcendent or Supreme Aspects. And he had never, ever heard of anyone acquiring a Divine one. Never!

Anything with the "divine" prefix was so hard to find that it mostly lived in the realm of myths and legends. After all, the human race had not reached that high yet; it was only slightly more than a decade since humans managed to finally conquer the Third Nightmare and receive the ability to evolve their cores to Transcendent rank.

As Transcendents — or Saints, as they were called in the real world — powerful Awakened ruled over the Dream Realm, but even they did not dare to face Nightmare Creatures of higher ranks. Subsequently, there were not a lot of Memories and Echoes of Supreme rank around, let alone Sacred... or Divine. The same went for Aspects.

And yet Sunny just got one!

He grinned, driven half-mad by joy and arrogance. However, his jubilation was a little muddled. After all, there was that weird innate ability. Of course, he had no intention of becoming someone's magical slave, with no free will of his own. To hell with that!

But it wasn't that bad. All he had to do to avoid that fate was to conceal his True Name. No one except for him could see his status. That meant that Sunny just had to keep his mouth shut, and no one will know that he even had one.

It meant giving up on all the benefits that someone who was bestowed a True Name after the First Nightmare was entitled to, but it all paled in comparison with a Divine Aspect.

'Not a problem,' Sunny thought with a smirk.

If the Spell had the ability to laugh, it would surely do so after hearing his thoughts. However, it didn't. Instead, it began to speak again:

[The First Seal is broken.]

[Awakening dormant powers...]

Chapter 16: Rebirth | Shadow Slave

Sunny felt something waking up inside of him. With a startled cry, he clutched his chest and stared into the darkness, trying to understand what was happening. The feeling was not painful or unpleasant, yet it was like nothing he had ever experienced. It was as though his soul was being shaken awake, infused with strange new energy.

However, that energy did not come from some outside source. Rather, it was coming from within, as though it had always been there, sleeping.

The energy filled every fiber of his being. Sunny felt his emotions becoming clearer and sharper. Then, his body began to change, too. He felt as though a miniature star was burning in the center of his chest: waves of heat were radiating from it, slowly reaching his stomach and shoulders, then his arms and legs, then his hands and feet.

Under that heat, his bones, muscles, organs and blood vessels were being rebuilt and revitalized. Sunny felt like he was being reborn. He was becoming stronger, faster, healthier.

It was euphoric.

With each second, his transformation was becoming more profound. New confidence settled in Sunny's heart. He was not a weak, frail street kid anymore. He was not as vulnerable against anyone who would wish to bully him as he was in the past.

With his powers awakened and his will tempered by the horrors of the First Nightmare, he was now someone you would not want to cross.

After some time had passed, the star burning in his chest finally cooled down. The heat was replaced with a soothing coldness. That coldness washed over Sunny's body, taking away all the aches and discomforts that had been accumulated there over the years. Then it moved up, reaching his brain and, finally, his eyes.

His vision strangely doubled.

He could still see the void populated by an endless pattern of stars. But he could also see something different.

A silent, calm dark sea illuminated by a lonely black sun.

From his previous knowledge, Sunny knew that this was his so-called Sea of Soul. But he also knew that it was supposed to look quite different.

For starters, it was supposed to be much more lively. The star hanging above — the visual representation of his soul core — was supposed to be burning with bright light, filling the Soul Sea with a warm, blinding shining.

However, Sunny's soul was dark and lightless.

'That's strange.'

He took a look at the black sun. At a closer examination, it actually turned out to be transparent. It's just that with no other major source of light around, the star had appeared to be as dark as its surroundings.

Also, no one was supposed to be here except for him. It was his soul, after all! But Sunny had a nagging feeling that somewhere just beyond the periphery of his vision, hidden in the darkness, shapeless forms were constantly moving. No matter how he turned his head, he couldn't catch a clear glimpse of them. And yet the feeling would not go away.

Not wishing to waste any more time on this right now, Sunny turned back to the black sun and finally spotted two spheres of light orbiting around it, as though caught in the soul core's gravity well. A subtle smile appeared on his face.

These were his Memories: Silver Bell and Puppeteer's Shroud. Later, there would be dozens of such spheres here. If he was lucky, he would even acquire an Echo or two!

The Spell's voice suddenly pulled him out of the Sea of Soul.

[Awakening Aspect Ability...]

'This is it. The moment of truth,' Sunny thought.

Divine Aspect or not, his immediate future still depended on the first Aspect Ability he would receive. His role in the Dream Realm would be based on its characteristics. If it was a combat ability, he would be most useful on the frontlines of the bloody battles against the Nightmare Creatures. If it was tied to sorcery, he would likely become a powerful, but fragile ranged fighter.

If it was something having to do with utility, he would be a vitally important part of the behind-the-scenes workings of the Dream Realm. Utility Abilities were also extremely valued in the real world, where Awakened performed many tasks that kept it going.

If he was lucky, he could even become a healer. Healers were very rare, and as such, sought-after specialists.

[Aspect Ability acquired.]

[Aspect Ability Name: Shadow Control.]

Sunny hurriedly summoned the runes. He wanted to go to the description of his new ability right away, but then decided to give his overall information a look first.

Name: Sunless.

True Name: Lost from Light.

Rank: Dreamer.

Shadow Core: Dormant.

Shadow Fragments: [12/1000].

'What? What is that?'

Where the rank of his soul core was supposed to be written, a mysterious "Shadow Core" appeared instead. Sunny looked at it, blinking. He had

never heard of anyone having a different kind of core before. Was he that unique?

This enigmatic shadow core would certainly explain why his Sea of Soul looked so strange. And also... He moved his eyes down, noticing the "Shadow Fragments" counter. Usually, there was supposed to be an indicator of the number of soul shards consumed. However, it was nowhere to be seen.

'Do I... do I actually have a completely different progression path than all Awakened?'

The idea was as exciting as it was frightening. Not having to fight for resources with anybody else was an incredible advantage. Most of the human society in the Dream Realm was built around the acquisition of soul shards. If he had no need to gather them to evolve... not only would he be able to become more powerful with incredible speed, he would also be completely self-sufficient.

On the other hand, he had no idea how to acquire these shadow fragments. However, he had gotten twelve of them somehow already: so whatever it was that he had to do, he had already done it in the First Nightmare.

'I'll have to explore this carefully.'

Satisfied with this decision, Sunny continued to study the runes.

Memories: [Silver Bell], [Puppeteer's Shroud].

Echoes: —

Attributes: [Fated], [Mark of Divinity], [Child of Shadows].

Aspect: [Shadow Slave].

Aspect Rank: Divine.

Aspect Abilities: [Shadow Control].

Aspect Ability Description: [Your shadow is more independent than most. It is an invaluable helper.]

'What is that supposed to mean?'

Sunny held his breath and began to read the description again, but at that moment, a new set of runes appeared just below it. Simultaneously, the Spell's voice resounded in the black void.

[All power has a price.]

[You have received a Flaw.]

[Your Flaw is: ...]

Sunny read the runes, and his eyes widened in horror.

'Oh, no. No, no, no...'

Chapter 17: Three Simple Words

He closed his eyes, then opened them again, hoping that the runes would disappear.

'Please, be gone! Please!'

But the runes were still there, shining slightly, as though mocking him.

Flaw: [Clear Conscience].

Flaw Description: [You cannot lie.]

Sunny stared at these three simple words, feeling like there was a bottomless abyss opening right beneath his feet. The Spell, which was usually frivolous with its descriptions, decided to be straight and on point this time. There were only three words. They left him no room to maneuver.

'Can't lie. I can't lie? Me? How am I supposed to live if I can't lie?!'

Sunny's very survival was predicated on his ability to deceive and outsmart other people. Even the Spell itself congratulated him on his treachery! Without the ability to lie, he wouldn't be able to achieve anything.

Not to mention...

His heart suddenly felt as though it was about to stop.

If he could only tell the truth, how was he supposed to hide his True Name? Wouldn't anyone be able to turn him into an obedient slave by simply asking a couple of innocent questions?

"Sh..."

Sunny was about to scream and curse, but at that moment, the Spell spoke again.

[Wake up, Lost from Light!]

The black void spun and disappeared.

Sunny opened his eyes.

The armored ceiling of the police station's vault hang above him. No one would call its aesthetics beautiful, but to him, it was the most majestic sight. Only now did he realize how much he had missed the real world.

It was safe and familiar. There were no monsters or slavers... well, at least officially. There was no constant fear of torturous death.

It was home.

In addition, Sunny felt incredible. The cold that had crept deep into his bones during the Nightmare was gone, taking with it all the pain that his wounded body had been enduring day after day. His feet and wrists were not in agony, his back had forgotten the bite of the whip, and he could even breathe without feeling the sharp edges of his broken ribs cutting deeper and deeper into his lungs.

What a blessing!

The sudden disappearance of pain, coupled with the new vitality that permeated his body, almost made Sunny cry.

'I really survived.'

He slowly looked down and then froze, breathless.

On a cheap plastic chair placed beside his reinforced medical bed sat the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

She had short, raven-black hair and icy blue eyes. Her flawless skin was smooth, supple and as white as snow. Actually, this was Sunny's first time meeting someone as pale as he himself was. However, while Sunny's pallor looked strange and unhealthy, the beautiful stranger was nothing short of striking.

The woman seemed to be in her late twenties. She was wearing a dark blue uniform with silver epaulets and black leather boots. The jacket of her uniform was casually unbuttoned, revealing a black tank top beneath.

Currently, she was stretching her arms above her head, clearly bored and sleepy. The gesture forced the thin fabric to tighten, provocatively accentuating her full breasts.

Mesmerized, Sunny almost missed the fact that there was a shoulder insignia on the woman's left sleeve. There were three stars on it.

'Three stars, huh,' he thought, distracted. 'Three stars means an Ascended... huh... yeah. Wait. An Ascended?!'

But before Sunny could fully digest the meaning of this word, he realized that the woman was staring at him, too.

"What are you looking at?" she said, not a gram of humor in her voice.

Sunny blinked a couple of times, embarrassed, and quickly came up with an excuse. Then he opened his mouth and answered:

"Your breasts."

A second later, his eye widened in absolute horror.

Because he wasn't planning to say those words at all! His mouth moved on its own!

A wave of terror suddenly drowned his mind.

The woman slowly smiled with a dangerous gleam in her eyes. Then, without any warning, she moved her hand and slapped Sunny across the face.

Sunny whole body was turned around. If it wasn't for the restraints holding him in place, he would have probably flown off the bed. For a moment, he even saw stars.

But it could still be considered getting off lightly. An Ascended, the woman was an Ascended! She could have torn his head clean off with a flick of a finger. Why did he have to offend someone so powerful, of all people?!

Meanwhile, the woman cleared her throat and crossed her arms.

"Are you awake now?"

Sunny held his numb cheek and carefully nodded.

"Good. Let me give you a piece of advice: don't just say anything that comes to your mind. Especially to girls. It's not like you haven't seen a girl before, right?"

'Say "Thank you! I definitely will not!"' Sunny thought.

But instead, his mouth moved on its own, and he said:

"I've seen plenty... but no one as beautiful as you."

Then he flinched back, his face as red as a lobster.

The woman stared at him for a few seconds and then burst into laughter.

"I see you haven't met a lot of Awakened then. By Awakened standards, I'm below average."

Sunny glanced at her with doubt.

The woman shook her head.

"As your soul core develops, the body gets rid of all its imperfections. So it's hard to find an unattractive Awakened, especially among the stronger ones. Live long enough, and you might just become a flower boy yourself."

Then she gave him a thorough look and added:

"Well... maybe. In any case, since you're awake — welcome back to the land of the living. Congratulations on surviving your First Nightmare,

Sleeper Sunless."

Sleeper Sunless.

That was how people would address him now, at least in the short span of days until the winter solstice — after that, he would either return from the Dream Realm as an Awakened or not return at all.

It felt strange to have a title put before his name. In the past, Sunny was rarely even addressed by name. People mostly called him things like "boy", "punk", "brat" or "hey, you!". But now he even had a title.

Sleeper Sunless...

Actually, the correct term was "Dreamer". But humans had their own set of words for those infected by the Nightmare Spell. Carriers who had just finished their First Nightmare were called Sleepers because of how they interacted with the Spell.

Basically, once his spirit enters the Spell, his body was going to fall into slumber. That slumber would continue for days, weeks, or even months — however long it takes him to escape the Dream Realm. Hence the term "Sleeper".

Once he escapes and becomes an Awakened, he would live his life normally during the day and return to the Dream Realm every time he falls asleep. The Awakened were called the same by the Spell and the humans. That word was also sometimes used as a general term for all carriers.

Then, if he were to decide to enter a Second Nightmare and managed to survive, he would become an Ascended — people called them Masters. Masters could enter and exit the Dream Realm as they wished. Some even chose to never come back there at all. More than that, they traveled between the worlds physically, not just in spirit.

And then, above the Masters, there were Saints — those who had conquered the Third Nightmare and earned the right to call themselves Transcendent. They were as powerful as demi-gods, and even more rare. Not only could they travel between the real world and the Dream Realm, but they could also take others with them.

But coming back to Masters...

The beautiful woman stood up and approached the reinforced medical bed. With practiced moves, she began to undo the restraint holding Sunny in place.

"I am Ascended Jet. You can call me Master Jet. These past three days, I was on watch duty due to your Nightmare."

'Right... before I fell asleep, the policeman told me that an Awakened would arrive in a few hours to monitor my condition. To kill the Nightmare Creature if... if I die and let it through.'

Sunny was unwilling to open his mouth, terrified that all sorts of truths would come spilling out. But there were things he simply had to know.

"Master Jet? I have a question."

"Go on."

"Why would a Master be put on watch duty? Isn't it... below your pay grade?"

Jet gave him a dark look.

"You're smarter than you seem. Recently, there was a lot of Gates opening in this sector. Most of the local Awakened are either wounded or occupied with the clean-up. Or dead. It's always like that close to the winter solstice."

She opened the final restraint and took a step back.

"Plus, there's not a lot of Awakened who, like me, directly work for the government. It's by far the least lucrative or glorious carrier one of us can

choose. Would you abandon wealth and fame to work abysmal hours and risk your life, fuelled only by altruism and sense of duty?"

Sunny wanted to say something flattering. Instead, he looked Master Jet right in the eyes and smirked.

"Of course not. I'm not an idiot!"

'Damn this damn Flaw! Damn!'

She stared at him with a humorless expression. Sunny thought that he was going to get slapped again.

But instead, Jet smiled.

"See, I was right. You really are smart."

Chapter 18: Absence Of Light

Sunny was enjoying a hot shower. After their short conversation, Master Jet had sent him to clean himself, saying that he "reeked of Nightmare". The unnatural slumber of the Spell would slow down the body's metabolism, and the medical apparatus he had been strapped into was supposed to take care of the rest, but he was still asleep for three whole days.

Even if only psychological, the scent of bloodshed and despair lingered around him.

'Ah, I'm in heaven,' Sunny thought, willing himself to temporarily forget about the looming disaster of the Flaw.

He was alone in the police station's showers, relaxing under the streams of hot water. After a bit of time had passed, Sunny reluctantly turned the tap off and walked over to the towel rack. Coincidentally, he saw himself reflecting in the mirror.

The changes in his physique were subtle, but noticeable. His pale skin seemed a little healthier, his muscles a bit more pronounced. He looked slender and lean instead of emaciated and frail, as he did before. There was a slight luster to his dark hair and a shine to his eyes.

However, he was still rather diminutive. Not exactly a picture of masculine handsomeness, to say the least.

'Flower boy, huh?' Sunny thought, full of bitterness.

Then he suddenly froze, noticing something strange. As he was looking at himself in the mirror, the reflection of his shadow seemed to move. It was as though the shadow lowered its head and quietly facepalmed.

Sunny quickly turned around, piercing his shadow with a nervous look. However, everything seemed normal. The shadow was doing exactly what it was supposed to do, repeating his every motion.

"I clearly saw you move," he said, feeling a bit strange. "You have just moved on your own, right?!"

Sunny glared at the shadow, which obediently glared back.

"Did you move or not?"

The shadow enthusiastically shook its head.

'What the?!'

"What do you mean, "no"?! You've just moved your head! Do you think I'm a fool?"

The shadow seemed to think for a bit and then shrugged.

Sunny was left with his mouth agape.

"Your shadow is more independent than most. It is an invaluable helper," he muttered finally.

Right. This was how the Spell had described his Aspect Ability.

But what exactly could his shadow do?

He decided to experiment a little.

"Hey, you. Tell me what you can do."

The shadow was silent and motionless.

'Right. It doesn't have vocal cords.'

As though that made any sense! Shadows were not supposed to have muscles either, and yet it knew how to move.

"Uh... show me?"

No reaction. It seems the shadow was content pretending to be an ordinary, lifeless blob of darkness.

Sunny sighed.

'I'm doing this wrong.'

Independent or not, the shadow was still a part of him. It was a manifestation of his Aspect Ability. So instead of asking the shadow, he really should have been asking himself.

"Not going to talk, are you?"

Sunny closed his eyes and directed his perception within, exploring himself for the first time since returning to the real world. He felt the beating of his heart, the steady rising of his chest, the slight chill of the shower room. He heard droplets of water falling on the tiled floor. Felt the movement of filtered air against his skin.

And there, on the verge of his consciousness, something new.

A completely new sense.

Sunny concentrated on it, and suddenly a whole other world opened to him. It was hard to describe with words, just like one would have trouble explaining how hearing or touch feels.

It was as though he could communicate with vast forms that crowded around him and receive an understanding of both their own shape and the surrounding space, guided by the different degrees of pressure they exerted on his mind and each other.

That understanding came naturally and instantaneously, like an instinct.

These forms were shadows. And among them, one — not the largest one, but the deepest — didn't feel like an external entity. It was like a part of his soul.

Once Sunny grasped the feeling of it, he could sense the shadow just like he sensed his limbs. The only thing was that his limbs were made out of flesh, and the shadow was made from the absence of light.

Sunny opened his eyes and looked at the shadow. Then, with a thought, he willed it to raise an arm.

The shadow raised an arm.

He willed it to sit, stand, turn around, kick. Then he willed it to change shape, turning into a circle, then a line, then a monster. And finally, back to his own silhouette. The shadow was mercurial and fluid, like water. The only constant was its size.

"Ha! How about that?"

The shadow pouted, then reluctantly raised its thumbs.

"But how are you useful?"

He willed the shadow to strike the towel rack. It obediently moved and delivered a powerful kick. Of course, since it was just a shadow, its leg passed over the towels harmlessly, not even causing them to sway a little.

"Is that... all you can do?"

In his mind, the image of shadow tentacles tearing the mighty tyrant into little pieces cracked and shattered mercilessly. It seemed he would not be competing with Shadow God any time soon.

How regretful.

The shadow looked at him with disdain. Then it shrugged and stopped moving altogether, clearly offended.

Sunny sighed and took a towel off the rack.

"Alright. I will explore it later."

A few minutes after that, he was wearing a clean police-issued tracksuit and heading for the cafeteria. Master Jet was waiting for him at one of the tables, with two trays full of steaming synthetic food in front of her.

"Help yourself."

Sunny glanced at the cheap gruel, which was not so different from the stuff he used to consume in the outskirts, and sighed. Somehow, he had expected his first meal after becoming a Sleeper to be more lavish.

Still, it was food.

He sat down and began to wolf down the gruel ravenously. He was very, very hungry.

In the process, his thoughts began to wander. Sunny stole a glance at Jet and wondered. The Spell told him to find a master, and the next thing he knew there was a woman calling herself Master right in front of him. He tried to imagine being an obedient slave to someone like her.

Weird thoughts started to appear in his mind...

'You know what, Sunny,' he thought with dark irony. 'Knowing your luck, this would be a perfect moment for her to ask...'

"What are you thinking about?"

Sunny choked on the gruel. He felt his mouth beginning to open, and put all of his will into staying silent. A second passed without him saying anything. Then a weird pressure appeared in his mind, which soon turned into blinding pain. He endured it for a couple more seconds before giving up.

"I was thinking that it would be a perfect moment for you to ask me about what I am thinking," he finally said.

Jet gave him a weird look.

"Alright. Are you almost finished with your food?"

Sunny nodded.

"Then I'll begin. As per protocol, I am obligated to inform you of a few things. It is mostly a formality. First of all, concerning your Nightmare..."

She glanced at him and sighed.

"You are entitled to receive free psychological counseling. No matter what traumatic experience you have encountered, there is no shame in asking for help. Your mind is as important as your body — it's only right to keep it healthy. Are you interested?"

Sunny shook his head. Jet shrugged and continued:

"As you wish. You can also talk to me. Was it very hard?"

How could he answer?

"It was simultaneously much worse than I expected and exactly as bad as I expected."

She nodded, satisfied with that explanation.

"That's a good attitude. I won't pry any further. Us outskirts rats are way more resilient than people think."

Sunny looked at her in surprise.

"Master Jet... you grew up in the outskirts?"

She grinned.

"What? You can't tell because of my exquisite manners and polished exterior?"

He blinked a couple of times, surprised.

"I couldn't tell at all."

After thinking for a while, he added:

"Are there a lot of people like us among the Awakened?"

Jet's smile disappeared.

"No. There's not. In fact, they can be counted on one hand."

As expected. Odds were really stacked against people like them. That made the three stars on Jet's insignia even more exceptional.

'One day, I'll be a Master too.'

If she can do it, why can't I?

"So... what happens now? What else are you obligated to tell me?"

Sunny had no idea what he was supposed to do after leaving the police station. The winter solstice was just several weeks away.

Jet leaned back and answered:

"That's basically it. There are some additional hoops to jump through, mostly having to do with your family, but... well. I've read your file, so I know it doesn't apply. The only thing left is to decide how you will be preparing for your first journey into the Dream Realm."

She looked at her communicator and grimaced.

"I must stay, your luck is exceptionally bad. There's not a lot of time at all. First of all: you are free to do what you want. No one is forcing you to make a certain decision. That is to say, you can choose to prepare on your own, or not prepare at all. Party until the lights go out."

Sunny was not very well versed in partying.

"However, I would advise against that. As a Sleeper, you are also entitled to enroll in the Awakened Academy. You'll be provided with food, lodging and a wide choice of preparatory classes. This late into the year, you won't be able to learn a lot. But it's better than nothing."

She was silent for a few seconds, then added:

"More importantly, you will get acquainted with most of the people who will enter the Dream Realm with you. Some of them might become your

companions for life."

'And some may end up trying to end that life once we're inside the Spell,' Sunny added, reading between the lines of what Master Jet had said.

"So, what do you say? Do you want me to take you to the Academy?"

Sunny thought about it. Strangely, his Flaw was silent, not forcing him to answer one way or the other.

'Is it because I haven't made up my mind yet?'

Finally, he looked down, at his empty tray, and made a decision.

Free lodging and food, you say?

"Yeah. I want to go to the Academy."

Chapter 19: Crossing The Bridge

Sunny was standing in front of the massive, seemingly indestructible red gates of the Awakened Academy. The Academy was, in fact, a city within the city. It was built like a fortress, with a high wall made of hard alloy, deep moat and numerous large-caliber turrets which were placed in certain positions to create a deadly air-suppression dome. No Nightmare Creature, not even colossal titans, were supposed to be able to break through its defenses.

It was a legendary place. Actually, many of the most popular webtoons, youth dramas and novels took place right behind that wall. Adventures, rivalries and romantic entanglements of the young Awakened heroes were the mainstream theme of modern entertainment. Never in his wildest dreams did Sunny imagine actually becoming one of these heroes.

Of course, how things really were differed a lot from how it was portrayed in the media. More than that, he had only four weeks to spend here before venturing into the Dream Realm. Even if he wanted to, there was not enough time for any type of entanglement. And he definitely did not want to.

He had to learn how to survive, not waste time on such nonsense!

The snow was slowly falling to the ground. It was cold and silent in front of the Academy gates. Except for Sunny, there was only one other person — another new Sleeper, if he had to guess.

It was a tall, slender girl of around his age, with clear grey eyes and a detached look on her face. She had strange, silver-white hair that was cut short and neatly parted to the side. Just like him, she was dressed in a police-issued tracksuit and had no personal belongings with her. On her head, there was a pair of old-fashioned headphones. She was calmly listening to music while they waited.

There was a certain vibe to the silver-haired girl. It was sort of... as though she was apart from the world. She looked confident and self-sufficient, but also a bit lonely.

Sunny wasn't going to start a conversation. Who knew what kind of situation he would put himself in due to that damn Flaw? It was better to keep to himself.

He glanced at the girl and sighed.

'I wonder what Flaw does she have?'

Finally, the gates began to open. The giant, ridiculously thick sheet of reinforced metal slowly descended, creating a long bridge. Sunny looked ahead with grim determination.

Master Jet's parting words echoed in his mind.

On their drive to the Academy, Sunny didn't speak much, looking at the sights of the city that were flying past the window of Jet's personal transport vehicle. Actually, it was his first time sitting in a PTV: most people in the city couldn't even dream about getting a license and purchasing a vehicle like that, having to do with public transportation.

He had ridden in the back of a police cruiser once or twice, but that was a completely different experience.

At some point, Master Jet looked at him and said:

"Since we both come from the outskirts, I'll give you three pieces of advice. Whether you listen to me or not is your business."

Sunny turned his head, waiting.

"First: once you're registered in the Academy, they'll offer you psychological counseling again. There will also be a valuable reward for sharing your experiences in the Nightmare and the details of your Appraisal. You'll be able to receive a soul shard, maybe even several of them."

He frowned.

"Are you trying to convince me to visit a psychiatrist again?"

Jet shook her head.

"No. I'm telling you to refuse."

Surprised, Sunny raised his eyebrows.

"Why?"

There was a pause before she answered.

"You're too green to understand, but out there in the Dream Realm, Nightmare Creatures are not the only danger. Once you grow powerful enough, humans will become an equal threat. The less they know about your Aspect, the better."

So that's how it is.

"The easiest way to defeat a powerful Awakened is to use their Flaw. That's why young fools in the Academy are encouraged in various ways to share the details of their Aspects. I'm not saying that the government will leak your information, but once two people know a secret, it's no longer a secret. And there's a lot of people working for the government."

That made a lot of sense.

"Thank you, Master Jet."

She gave him a nod.

"Second: there will be a lot of courses to choose from. All types of combat training, deep dives into Nightmare Creature categories and vulnerabilities, basics of various types of sorcery, artifact study and so on."

Sunny gulped. Actually, he was already agonizing about what weapon to train with. Four weeks was not enough to master a weapon, but at least he would have a basic understanding of it.

"Disregard all of that. The only course you have time to attend is Wilderness Survival."

He blinked.

"What?"

Jet glanced at him.

"It's different for city kids, who learn all sorts of useful things in school and from their tutors. But we don't have that advantage, do we? What was the biggest threat to your life during the Nightmare?"

Sunny thought about it. On the surface, the most dangerous thing he faced was the tyrant, followed by Hero... Auro of the Nine. But actually, what almost killed him in the end was...

"The cold."

Jet smiled.

"Smart. You only know how to survive in the city. But the Dream Realm is mostly made of wilderness. Do you know how to make a fire? How to procure food? How to find safe shelter? No. Fighting monsters is important, but it'll be useless if you die of hunger or exposure to the elements. Trust me. I've learned it the hard way."

Sunny nodded, angry at himself. It was so obvious, yet he never even thought about these seemingly simple things. He was blinded by his past habits and experience.

Human brains were like that: once accustomed to a certain way of living, it was hard to see past the already familiar routines. It was lazy thinking at its worst.

At that point, Master Jet had stopped the car and opened the door, getting out. Sunny followed her and was momentarily stunned, staring at the colossal metal gates in front of them.

This was... the famous Awakened Academy.

After a few seconds, he shook off his amazement and turned to his senior.

"This is as far as I go," she said, looking cheerlessly at the walls of the Academy. "I've already notified them. Someone will come fetch you in a while."

There was something dark in the depths of her icy blue eyes. Sunny suddenly felt a cold feeling spreading through his body.

"What's the third advice?"

Master Jet glanced at him, then sighed.

"Remember: no one can survive in the Dream Realm alone. That's not an opinion, that's a fact. Try to get along with your peers, even if they don't treat you well. It might save your life."

Then she suddenly smiled and patted him on the shoulder.

"You've done well to survive until now. Make sure to keep yourself alive in the future, too."

Then she got back into her PTV and drove off. Just like that, she was gone.

The end of the metal bridge hit the special grooves in the ground and stopped moving after a set of loud clicks. Sunny looked ahead, wondering what kind of life he was going to be living in the next four weeks.

Keep your Flaw and Aspect secret, learn to survive in the wilderness, be nice to other Sleepers. It didn't sound too hard.

But, for some reason, he was sure that these weeks were going to be as challenging as his First Nightmare. Or maybe even worse.

Seemingly free of such concerns, the silver-haired girl walked forward and stepped on the bridge.

Sunny sighed and reluctantly followed.

Chapter 20: Outcast Once Again

The Sleeper part of the compound was relatively small and situated in the southern part of the Academy, surrounded on all sides by training fields and parks.

It was a low, modern building constructed with reinforced materials. Like the majority of buildings in the Academy, most of it was hidden below the ground, leaving only a couple of floors above it. With its white, pristine alloy walls and wide windows, it must have looked beautiful in the summer, contrasted against all the greenery around.

Inside, the building was spacious and well-lit. Sunny and the silver-haired girl were taken to a large hall where a hundred or so of young men and women — Sleepers of the same unfortunate timing as the two of them — were already waiting for the beginning of the induction ceremony. Most of them were nervous, tense and excited.

Logistics of the Academy were a constant headache for the administrators since the rate at which the Spell infected people was always chaotic. There was no way to orderly structure for batches of Sleepers to undergo any type of standardized education on a shared schedule: some of them had a full year to prepare for the Dream Realm, some only months, some even mere days.

That's why these induction ceremonies were held each month at the beginning of the year and then every week once the winter solstice began to loom near. Some of the Sleepers in the hall had to wait days to be inducted, while Sunny had lucked out and was delivered to the Academy just hours before the scheduled event.

Once inside the hall, he understood two things.

Firstly, everyone was well-dressed and in possession of a suitcase, a duffel bag, or at least a backpack carrying their personal belongings. They were obviously coming prepared, most likely from home, sent off by their families. So Sunny and the silver-haired girl, who came empty-handed and wearing simple police-issued clothes, were not a norm like he had assumed, but actually an eye-catching anomaly.

'Right. That makes sense.'

Secondly, Master Jet was not being overly humble when she called herself below average by Awakened standards. Even though these young people were just starting their paths as Awakened, their looks were dazzling. Everyone was handsome, beautiful and radiated health.

He swallowed.

'Still, I feel like none of them compare. She might not be as perfectly shaped, but... I don't know... she has a presence. It's like shadows become deeper and the temperature drops by a couple of degrees when she's in a room.'

Was this the difference between a Sleeper and a Master?

But all of these thoughts were just him trying to postpone the inevitable. Sunny already knew that he was in for a wild ride.

Because he could not lie, and all of these excited youths, regardless of their clothes, gender and looks, wanted to do one thing.

Talk.

Every one of them wanted to talk with fellow Sleepers. They wanted to discuss their Nightmares, their future journey into the Dream Realm, and everything in between. They wanted to ask questions. They wanted to be asked questions. They wanted to discuss something important or just chit-chat about stupid things.

Everyone wanted to share.

'It's a nightmare!' Sunny moaned, disturbed and fearful. 'I'm doomed!'

Then, with a bit of grim determination, he gritted his teeth and slowly exhaled.

'Just think about it as a continuation of your trial. You survived the black mountain, so you can survive this, too.'

He had faced heroes, villains, monsters and even gods. Was he going to be afraid of a bunch of teenagers?

...He might have underestimated how scary teenagers can be.

In half an hour, pretty much everyone in the room hated his guts.

After a short series of conversations, Sunny had acquired a reputation of an obnoxious, foul-mouthed pervert. This reputation was quickly solidified. He was slapped a few times and even punched once. He also discovered a couple of new things about his true self — namely, that deep down inside he was apparently rude, arrogant, and more than a little bit lustful.

The conversations went something like this:

"Look at all these young people. How many do you think will return from the Dream Realm? How many will perish? What do you think our own chances of survival are?"

"I don't know, but I'm pretty sure that a pompous fool like you will die first!"

Or:

"I even received an armor-type Memory in my Nightmare. It's an enchanted robe. Would you like to see?"

"Actually, I would prefer to see you without a robe..."

Or:

"Then those lowlifes began to rob the bodies. It was disgusting! They even took their shoes! What kind of degenerate would take a dead man's shoes?"

"I once killed a man and took his boots. They were nice boots."

"... What? You killed someone just for a pair of boots?"

"Of course not! There were other reasons. I also took his cloak."

Once again an outcast, Sunny was eventually left alone. People seemed to be avoiding him. Unperturbed, he found a quiet corner and stood there, glad that no one wanted to talk to him anymore. His face hurt, and there was blood dripping from his nose. Being ostracised from a group was nothing new, but it still stung.

However, he was smiling.

Because in the process of turning the whole batch of Sleepers against himself, Sunny had discovered something vital.

He learned how to control his Flaw.

Once asked a question, he could not keep quiet. He also couldn't lie. However, after a lot of experimentation, Sunny had found out that with a bit of practice, he could influence the exact way the truth eventually came out.

It was like this: after receiving a question, his mind automatically produced a truthful answer. After that, the Flaw would force him to say that answer aloud. Refusal to speak would result in the buildup of pressure, then piercing pain. The longer he kept quiet, the worse the pain would become. Eventually, he would have to surrender and reveal the truth.

However, in these moments between receiving the question and surrendering to the pain, the actual wording of the answer could be changed. The more it strayed from the initial thought, the more resistance he would meet — once again in the form of pressure, then pain. It still had to be truthful, but it didn't have to be so stark.

For example, if Master Jet were to catch him staring again and ask what he was looking at, instead of embarrassing himself Sunny would have been able to endure a bit of pain and simply say "You."

That would still be the truth, however, the result would be entirely different.

Hidden in the corner, Sunny grinned as he observed the Sleepers.

'This is good. This is great. This is something I can work with!'

After all, one didn't have to lie to deceive a person. Sometimes, truth was the best material for creating deceit.

If used with a certain devious type of intelligence, truth could be as misleading as lies. For example, in one of his previous conversations, Sunny had confessed that he had once stolen boots from a dead man. The other guy was horrified and asked if he had really killed someone just for a pair of boots. The answer the Flaw forced him to give was that there were other reasons and that he had also taken the man's cloak.

The true reason for killing the veteran slaver was that he had whipped Sunny a few hours prior. Besides, he was already dying. The cloak had nothing to do with the killing itself. However, the wording of the answer created an impression that it did.

Thus, two truthful statements, when put together, created an effect akin to a lie.

This was just a simple example. With a lot of effort and intense thinking, Sunny could create other types of manipulative truths. It was going to be extremely difficult and risky, but it could be done.

He just needed a bit of luck.

It was time to put his theory to practice.

Sunny didn't forget what his main goal was — to make sure that no one ever finds out his True Name. To achieve that, he had to create an impression that he was the most pathetic, weak person in this whole building. Someone who would never receive a positive appraisal, let alone a divine Aspect and a True Name.

However, since this would be a lie, he couldn't just go and say it.

So how was he to convince everyone that he definitely did not have a powerful Aspect and an impressive record with the Spell?

His eyes fell on a particular group of Sleepers. There were five or six of them, gathered around a tall, confident young man.

The young man had brown hair and a gentle, handsome face. His eyes were green, with a hint of friendly humor. His posture, figure and attentive gaze betrayed someone who went through extensive training. Everything about the young man screamed of nobility and strength.

Just at that moment, one of his companions was saying with a tone of amazement:

"Ascended? You have received an Ascended Aspect? What... what was your Appraisal?!"

The young man smiled humbly.

"Oh. It was "excellent."

Sunny stopped in front of the group, as though by accident. After hearing the young man's answer, he frowned and looked at him with disdain.

Then, with a voice full of utter bewilderment, Sunny said:

"Ascended, excellent? That's it? What's the big deal?"

Chapter 21: First Performance | Shadow Slave

His words hung in silence. The Sleepers looked at Sunny with a hilarious assortment of emotions, ranging from bewilderment to shock. The young man with humorous eyes just smiled politely.

To be honest, getting an Ascended Aspect during the First Nightmare was extremely rare. He was certainly someone special, maybe even outstanding. Actually, despite their apparent differences, the young man somehow reminded Sunny of Hero... Auro of the Nine.

There was a special type of calculating coldness hidden deep inside their eyes. He had encountered such people before, mostly among the veterans of various street gangs in the outskirts.

They simply called this type of coldness "murder math". Basically, it was a habit experienced fighters developed — no matter where they were and what mood they were in, there was always a sober part of their minds constantly calculating the most efficient way of killing the person in front of them, just in case such need arises.

'Ugh. Why do I have to antagonize someone like that, of all people?'

But Sunny really had no grounds to complain. After all, he brought this on himself.

After a few seconds, one of the young man's companions finally blinked and said:

"Uh... friend, you must not know a lot about the Spell. Caster's results are truly remarkable."

Then, with a furtive glance at the remarkable Caster, he added:

"He is a Legacy, after all."

An actual, living and breathing descendent of an Awakened clan? Sunny reevaluated his opinion of the humorous young man. Legacies were known to be trained for their eventual entrance into the Spell from the moment they could walk. For them, being infected was a certainty instead of a possibility.

They were extremely formidable people.

'Just great!' he thought bitterly and made his frown deepen.

"Are you trying to pull a prank on me? You call this remarkable?!"

The bewilderment in the eyes of these Sleepers was slowly being replaced by hostility.

"Listen, friend. If you don't think that an Ascended Aspect is remarkable, then please share with us your own amazing results! What, pray tell, was your Appraisal?"

Caster himself was still keeping quiet and smiling. However, his defenders were growing restless.

This was exactly what Sunny wanted to happen. He smiled with utter contempt.

"I would let you know... my Appraisal was, uh, it was "glorious"! Yes, glorious. And the Aspect I acquired was of the Divine rank."

After that, he received a number of strange looks. No one had ever received a Divine Aspect before; so, of course, they were starting to think that he was a lunatic. But there was still a sliver of doubt... maybe that strange guy was a descendant of a powerful clan? A peerless prodigy? Maybe his Appraisal was, indeed, glorious...

Sunny had to dispel that tiny bit of doubt.

"Mind you, I'm not some lofty Legacy. Pfft! I'm from the outskirts. I've never even received combat training. All that training and he only got an "excellent"? What did he do during the Nightmare, pick his nose the whole time?"

The expressions of all the Sleepers that were listening to his bragging instantly changed. An outskirt rat with no training... yeah, sure. Who was he trying to fool?

Finally, with the same polite smile, Caster spoke:

"Glorious? That is interesting. Would you mind telling us what were your achievements in the Nightmare?"

Sunny grinned.

"Sure, no problem! First of all, I killed an... uh... an awakened tyrant."

Every "uh" cost him a couple of moments of intense pain, but he didn't let it show on his face. His expression was nothing but smug and confrontational.

The mere mention of a tyrant, let alone an awakened one, made a couple of Sleepers smile with ridicule.

"Oh, really? How did you kill it?"

An arrogant look appeared on Sunny's face.

"How? Let me tell you, I didn't even have to lift a finger. I just spat, and it was torn to pieces!"

Which was true. Sunny had spat a mouthful of blood on the altar, and as the result, Mountain King was ruthlessly dismembered by Shadow God.

Someone openly laughed.

"This guy is either insane or purposefully messing with us. Listen here, shorty. Have some decency, okay? Who would believe such a lie?"

Sunny was genuinely angry. He wanted to retort, saying that he wasn't short. But he couldn't.

Because that would be a lie, damn it!

So, instead, he just gritted his teeth and said with a voice full of outrage:

"I can't answer that, because it's not a lie!"

"Are you really insisting that you had killed an awakened tyrant — a tyrant! — and with a bit of spit no less?"

Sunny knitted his brows.

"That's the truth!"

More laughter followed.

"Crazy bastard!"

"He actually believes in his own crap!"

"Insane, he's insane..."

Unexpectedly, Caster stopped his companions.

"Guys."

After the laughter quieted down, he asked in a friendly manner:

"What else did you achieve?"

What? That wasn't enough? Sunny raised his chin.

"Let me think... Oh! I also killed an awakened swordsman."

"Really? How did you do that?"

Acting as though he was a little bit embarrassed, Sunny looked down.

"That... actually, that time I had to lift a finger. I even had to shake it a couple of times. That was enough to kill him, though."

He was holding the Silver Bell between his fingers, which led to Hero being attacked and eventually killed by the tyrant. So, technically, all his statements were true.

"What a crackpot!"

"Ha! Can you believe this idiot?!"

"Poor bastard. Not only is he weak, he's also lost it..."

Caster gave his companions a long look and then turned to Sunny.

"Anything else?"

Sunny blinked. Time for the finishing touch...

"Something else? Uh... Well. Oh, right! I communicated with a bunch of gods, even though they were all dead. I made one of them wake up. He gave me a blessing! I was blessed by a god, do you all understand?!"

The Sleepers were silently shaking their heads or looking at him with pity. Caster sighed.

"I see. Well, in comparison to your achievements, mine do look rather average. Thank you for sharing with us. I hope you'll be as successful once we enter the Dream Realm."

Sunny smiled with a look of smug superiority on his face.

"You better believe it!"

With that, he turned around and walked away.

'Ah. That's a job well done.'

He was pretty sure that after this performance, no one would ever believe that he actually had some kind of a powerful Aspect or did anything worthy of notice during the Nightmare. He only told them the truth, and yet managed to make everyone believe in the opposite of the truth.

Such an incredible feeling.

What did they think of him now? They thought that he was weak, grew up without any education in the outskirts, and had no training. More than that,

he was apparently either insane or incredibly stupid. His temper was terrible.

Truly pathetic and pitiful fellow.

Now, whenever he was asked about his Aspect, he could just honestly say that it was of the Divine rank, and be laughed at. People would rather believe that the Spell had ceased to exist than that he was someone noteworthy. He could even scream about his accomplishments from the roof, and no one would believe him.

Subsequently, no one would ever suspect that he had a True Name.

'Just you wait, fools. One day I'll be the one laughing.'

As Sunny was walking away, he heard one of the Sleepers talking to Caster:

"Why didn't you put that lunatic in his place? He has belittled you!"

After a short pause, Caster answered. His voice sounded low and mellow.

"Poor kid must have lost his mind in the Nightmare. It often happens. He'll most likely die soon, so being kind is the least I can do..."

The corner of Sunny's mouth twitched.

'What a nice guy.'

He knew that Caster's words were based on a false assumption, but, for some reason, still felt a cold chill running up his spine.

Chapter 22: Corpse Corner | Shadow Slave

Satisfied with his performance, Sunny walked back to the deserted corner of the hall. He felt people looking at him with mockery, contempt and pity. No one seemed to be willing to stay close to him. It was just as well: he didn't want to be bothered anyway.

Still, weren't their reactions a bit exaggerated? It's not like he was carrying an infectious disease. Well, except for the Spell. But it wasn't really a disease, which everyone here should have known already.

Finally, he extricated himself from the crowd and reached the corner. For some reason, Sleepers were unwilling to approach it: currently, there was only one girl sitting quietly on the bench. Sunny gave her a look.

The quiet girl was delicate, demure and very pretty. Her clothes were tidy and neat. They weren't very expensive, but still rather tasteful. With her pale blond hair, big blue eyes and exquisite face, she looked like a beautiful porcelain doll.

She was subtly breathtaking.

However, there was something wrong with her. Sunny frowned, trying to understand what exactly about the girl made him uncomfortable. After a while, he realized that her empty, expressionless stare was reminding him of Mountain King.

Startled, Sunny understood that the girl was blind. It took him a couple of seconds to compose himself.

'What a shame.'

A bit disheartened, he carefully sat on the opposite end of the bench.

The girl wouldn't have survived the First Nightmare if she had been blind prior to entering the Spell. Which meant that she lost her sight as the result of the Appraisal.

It was her Flaw.

Suddenly, Sunny felt very apprehensive. A cold sensation spread through his chest.

'And I thought my Flaw was bad.'

No matter what Aspect Ability the blind girl had received in exchange for her sight, it was effectively a death sentence. A blind person had no chances of surviving in the Dream Realm, at least not with a dormant core. In some sense, the girl was already dead.

She was effectively a walking corpse.

Feeling extremely disturbed, Sunny turned away and studied the crowd of Sleepers. Now he understood why people were trying to avoid this corner: the girl was surrounded by an invisible, but almost palpable aura of death.

Sleepers usually weren't very superstitious, but anyone would feel uncomfortable in her company.

Armed with this knowledge, Sunny suddenly saw a pattern in how the young people in the hall were grouped. Instinctively, they all tried to stand close to those of their own circumstance.

At the far end of the hall, closest to the stage, were one or two small groups. People in these groups were distinct from the rest of Sleepers. They were all confident, calm and had an air of readiness. These were the Legacies: they were trained for the Spell since birth and had the highest chances of survival. Caster especially stood out from the rest.

Next to them was a larger number of expensively dressed young people. They were lively and excited, and only a little nervous. They were the scions of rich and high-ranking citizens. Their training was pretty good since such families had ample funds to hire private tutors — even Awakened ones. Their chances of survival weren't bad.

Then there was the largest part of the crowd, which consisted of kids from middle-class families. They might not have had the privilege of training under Awakened tutors, but their education wasn't bad. The government

spent a lot of effort to put all the necessary knowledge and skills into the school curriculum, preparing potential Sleepers in advance.

Some of them might have received additional training in private. To survive, these Sleepers would need to put in a valiant effort, and also have a bit of luck. But it wasn't improbable. Consequently, they were tense and nervous.

And lastly, there was Sunny and the blind girl. The corpses. From the point of view of other Sleepers in the hall, their chances of survival were close to zero.

'How charming.'

This was how the young Sleepers had subconsciously divided themselves. The only exception from this rule was the silver-haired girl, who stood alone and apart from everyone, seemingly indifferent to tension and nervousness that permeated the air. She was leaning against a wall with her eyes closed, still listening to music.

But regardless of their group and level of training, everyone was already tired of waiting.

'When will the damn induction ceremony start?' Sunny thought, irritated.

As though answering his thoughts, a tall man in a dark blue uniform appeared on the stage. Not only was he tall, he was actually almost a giant. Sunny even wondered if the man's mother had sinned with a bear...

Of course, it was impossible — bears had gone extinct long before the Spell even appeared. But he once saw pictures in a book, and they looked sort of similar.

'A bear-like Nightmare Creature, then.'

The giant man had wide shoulders, an athletic build and a gorgeous brown beard. His eyes were calm and serious. After reaching the center of the

stage, he gave Sleepers a long look. When his gaze reached the deserted corner, Sunny suddenly felt nervous.

'Uh... I sure hope he doesn't have a telepathic Ability. Otherwise, he might separate me from a limb or two on behalf of his mother.'

The man didn't pay Sunny a lot of attention and returned his gaze to the front rows of the crowd. Finally, he said in a deep, reverberating voice:

"I am Awakened Rock. Sleepers, welcome to the Academy."

Everyone listened without making a sound.

"In less than a month, you will be summoned to the Dream Realm. Some of you might think that you are well prepared. You're wrong. The Spell is merciless and cunning. The moment Awakened begin to think too much of themselves, they die. I've seen countless Sleepers like you lose their lives. I've also seen experienced Masters lose theirs. Even Saints are not assured to survive."

'Thanks for the encouragement,' Sunny thought sarcastically.

"In the following four weeks, we will do everything in our power to increase your chances of survival. You will receive training from the best instructors in the world. However, don't be misled by their fame: in the end, whether you return from the Dream Realm alive depends only on one person — you. The responsibility to survive is yours, and yours alone. "

Except for the Legacies, Sleepers were looking at each other with growing fear in their eyes. Awakened Rock continued:

"You are not children anymore. It's a shame, because you ought to be. But the Spell has decided otherwise. You have been to the First Nightmare, so you already know what it's like. Your parents, your teachers and your friends can't help you anymore..."

'Haven't had any of those in a long time.'

While listening to Rock's speech, Sunny couldn't help but feel a little excluded. It was all old news to him. However, he understood the instructor's purpose: he had to make young Sleepers afraid, because fear was the only thing that would keep them alive.

Finally, the speech got to the important part. Awakened Rock paused, giving kids listening to him a few moments to digest his words. Then, with a short nod, he continued:

"Now we will talk about the difference between Nightmares and the Dream Realm..."

Chapter 23: Dreams And Nightmares

That was something Sunny was keenly interested in.

Of course, he had a general knowledge of how things were set inside the Spell. But the First Nightmare had already shown him that reality was different from how it was portrayed in popular culture in a number of small, but infinitely important ways.

He needed to separate truth from the myths. And, of course, it was very advantageous to hear it from the mouth of someone who had actually been to the Dream Realm. So Sunny was all ears.

Awakened Rock began to speak:

"Most people are aware of what Nightmares are — because they have an impact on the real world and their lives. All of you have been warned before entering the First Nightmare that, should you perish there, a Nightmare Creature would be allowed to cross the threshold and enter reality."

Yup, that was the reason why Master Jet had to wait patiently by his side, prepared to deal with the monster if it appears.

"First Nightmares are unique, because each of them is individual. That's why only a single Creature can appear. However, starting from the Second Nightmare, things become much more dangerous. These Nightmares are not tied to an infected person. Instead, they are born in the Dream Realm. While the Seed of the Nightmare is growing, any number of Awakened can attempt to conquer it."

Hunting down Nightmares was the main responsibility of the Awakened. Sunny knew that much.

"Should they all die or fail to find the Seed before it matures, a Gate will open in the real world, letting through countless monsters. You all know the consequences. Other Awakened will be forced to withstand the onslaught on this side, but then there can be massive destruction or losses among the civilian population."

Opening Gates were something that every person on the planet feared. It was also the second disaster brought upon by the Spell after the initial appearance of the Nightmare Creatures. The main difference was that, in that initial wave, there were only dormant beasts. However, Gates had ranks of their own, and any type of Creature could potentially step through.

Not long before Sunny was born, a Rank 5 Gate opening left a whole continent uninhabitable. Luckily, high-rank Gates were very rare.

Awakened Rock's voice grew solemn.

"So it is not wrong to say that the purpose of the Awakened is to enter the Dream Realm, seek out maturing Nightmares and close them before any harm could befall the real world. From this, you can see that the Dream Realm and the Nightmares are connected, but are not one and the same. If Nightmares are the destination, then the Dream Realm is the road. But it is also so much more."

'Very romantic. Does Awakened Rock have poetic inclinations?'

"Simply put, the Dream Realm is a world. It is vast, mysterious and mostly unexplored. It is also dead. There is no life out there except for the Nightmare Creatures, corrupted ecosystems... and now us. But it wasn't always dead. We can tell that once, a long time ago, the Dream Realm was home to several primitive civilizations. There are a lot of ruins buried in its soil."

From what Sunny knew, those lost civilizations were not really primitive, it's just that their development was centered around soul cores and mysticism as opposed to technology. So, basically, miracles and magic. What were their names? How did they fall? No one knew.

Maybe they were destroyed by the Spell.

"We don't know if the Dream Realm exists inside the Spell as one of its illusions, just on an unimaginably larger scale, or if it's real, with the Spell only serving as a pathway between two realities. However, we do suspect that the illusions conjured up inside the Nightmares are based on its history.

They are replicas of past events, somehow reconstructed from the depths of time."

So, there might have been a real slave caravan on that black mountain once, a long time ago. Sunny remembered how time seemed to move in reverse at the beginning of his Nightmare. He thought about how things would have ended up without his involvement. Did the nameless temple slave perish in Mountain King's maw with the rest of the caravan?

Somehow, he felt that the nameless slave was not that simple. Otherwise, why would the Spell remember him? And what about Hero? Was he able to escape?

'I wonder.'

"There are four main differences between the Dream Realm and the Nightmares. Firstly, it doesn't have a "story". There is no predetermined conflict you are forced to resolve. You can move freely and explore, provided that you have the strength to stay alive in the wilderness. Most people tend to stay close to one of the human Citadels."

'That's good to know,' Sunny thought, unconvinced.

Sure, there were no predetermined conflicts in the Dream Realm. But with his [Fated] attribute, he was pretty certain to end up in some kind of trouble. So that freedom Awakened Rock had mentioned was relative in his case.

Meanwhile, the instructor continued:

"Secondly, as I have already mentioned, there are no people in the Dream Realm except for those who came from the real world. There are only monsters. Some of them can mimic human appearance, though, so be mindful of that."

Sunny felt cold sweat running down his back. Nightmare Creatures mimicking humans? So creepy! Since when was that a thing? Why hasn't he ever heard about it?

He stole a glance at the Legacies standing in the first row and noticed that they did not show any sign of surprise. So, they knew.

"Thirdly, unlike the First Nightmare, no Nightmare Creatures will appear in the real world if you die in the Dream Realm. It may sound cruel, but that's a good thing. Awakened forces are already spread thin. If we had to monitor every Sleeper, we wouldn't have resources to handle more important matters."

Considering that each Sleeper could spend weeks, sometimes even months in the Dream Realm, there was ruthless logic in that statement.

"And lastly, and most importantly. Unlike Nightmares, which are bound by the rules of fairness, there is no limit to what kind of Creature you can meet in the Dream Realm. During its trials, the Spell won't pit a dormant human against an opponent many ranks above them..."

'Oh really?' Sunny sneered.

However, he was forced to agree with Awakened Rock. Even though both Hero and Mountain King were way out of his league, they were still just one rank above him.

"... But in the Dream Realm, no such restrictions exist. Theoretically, you can stumble upon an Unholy Titan and die before even realizing what happened. So be careful and stick to the regions with enemies on par with your own rank. It's not an ironclad guarantee, but at least there will be less of a chance of you biting off more than you can chew."

Sticking to a region populated by Nightmare Creatures below his rank was even better. That was exactly what Sunny was planning to do.

Awakened Rock paused for a few moments, studying the faces of Sleepers in front of him. Then he added:

"When the solstice comes, you will be drawn into the Dream Realm. The exact location of where you will appear can't be predicted in advance, but there is a high chance that many of you will find yourselves in close

proximity to each other. Band together and proceed to the nearest human Citadel. Each Citadel is built around a Gateway. Once you reach it, you will be able to return."

Gateways were special portals that served as exit points from the Dream Realm. Once Sleepers reached such a portal, they would be able to escape back to reality and become Awakened. Their core would evolve, and they would also receive a second Aspect Ability. After that, they would return to the Dream Realm each time they fall asleep.

"If you can't locate or are unable to reach the nearest human Citadel, search for an unclaimed Gateway. It will usually be inside or near the most prominent landmark of the region. Work together to defeat its guardians and come back alive."

He gave them a heavy look.

"That is all for today. Next, follow the instructions sent to your communicators to find your assigned dormitory. Once settled, you may proceed to the cafeteria for some late supper. There will be a round of interviews after that, to prepare your suggested curriculums. Get a good night's rest. Your training starts tomorrow."

With that, he gave them a short nod and left.

Sunny sighed.

'Can't be predicted in advance, huh?'

With his luck, he would either drop right in the middle of a prosperous human Citadel and immediately roll into a Gateway, or appear in some region of the Dream Realm so remote and deadly that no one had ever heard about it or returned from it alive.

'Let's hope for the former.'

Since he couldn't do anything about it, Sunny wasn't very worried. There was something much more important on his mind — what, exactly, do they

serve here for supper...

Chapter 24: Moving Up In The World

Everything having to do with Sleepers was situated in the same building. Sunny followed the instructions sent to his communicator and quickly found the dormitories, which were situated on one of the lowest levels. To his surprise, he actually got a whole room to himself.

It had a bed with a soft mattress, a table, a dresser, and even a separate bathroom! The materials were new and aesthetically pleasing, the air crisp and sterile. It was warm inside, and the outer wall was equipped with a hidden screen that seamlessly imitated a wide window, opening to a picturesque vista of a snowy park.

There were even several sets of clothes with the Academy emblem provided to him for free.

'How extravagant,' Sunny thought, a little stunned.

Rationally, he understood that such an arrangement was not really luxurious. However, to him, who grew up wandering the outskirts, this room was like a palace. He scratched his head.

'Looks like... I've made it?'

Sunny glanced around, then winked at his shadow and smiled.

"I guess we're moving up in the world, huh?"

The shadow didn't respond, apparently not very impressed. Perhaps it didn't care about such things.

'Right, what would a stupid shadow know?'

Sunny changed into new clothes and studied himself in the mirror. Then, remembering something, he summoned the runes.

He finally had time to study the Puppeteer's Shroud.

Memory: [Puppeteer's Shroud].

Memory Rank: Awakened.

Memory Type: Armor.

Memory Description: [A worm of doubt once found its way into a righteous king's heart. With time, the king was devoured from inside and became its puppet. A lifetime later, the Puppeteer Worm escaped from the king's dead body, leaving behind a cocoon of black silk. No one knows where it went; however, once people dared to approach the silent castle, they found the silk among the mountains of gnawed bones and fashioned it into an armor.]

Sunny made a sour face.

'That is not that terrifying. Yeah. I'm not creeped out at all.'

Come to think of it, the first creature he killed was called a larva. If he were to assume that Mountain King was a mature Puppeteer Worm — and already a tyrant... then what the hell would it transform into after becoming a moth?

No, it's better not to think about it.

With a sigh, he summoned the Puppeteer's Shroud. Thin black threads immediately appeared around his body and wrapped it into a set of armor. It was made of dark-gray, soft fabric with several elements, such as bracers and shoulder guards, fashioned out of black, lusterless leather.

The armor was light, understated and did not restrain his movements at all. It also made no sound when he moved. Perfect equipment for someone who likes to lurk in the shadows!

Sunny smiled. He knew that this armor would be tough to pierce for any Creature below the Awakened rank, which gave him a great advantage in dealing with all dormant monsters. He also felt a sort of strange, faint calmness while wearing it.

'A worm of doubt... does it have enhanced protection against mental attacks?'

Somehow, he was sure of it.

A great trophy! He wouldn't expect anything less from the Memory of a powerful tyrant.

The only problem was that the Puppeteer's Shroud was obviously not meant to be worn on top of a full set of clothes. Quite satisfied, Sunny dismissed it and left his room, heading for the cafeteria.

'Not bad, not bad,' he thought, recalling all the rewards he had received during and after the First Nightmare.

The supper turned out to be as lavish as the dormitory. Sunny's wish to taste real meat finally came true: not only was it freely available to Sleepers, there wasn't even a limit to the amount each of them could eat! More than that, there were rice, bread, various side dishes, sauces, fresh vegetables, fruits, and all kinds of delicious beverages.

'Extravagant!' Sunny thought, steering clear of the coffee.

After building a small mountain of food on his plate, he found an empty seat and, for a while, forgot about the world's existence. As juicy, textured, perfectly seasoned meat filled his mouth, Sunny's vision suddenly was full of stars. He had to hold back an exhilarated moan.

And to think, he could have lived like that for a whole year!

'Damn Spell... why didn't you infect me a few months ago?'

He concentrated on the food, decimating the whole plate in no time. Satiated and more than a little gorged, Sunny longingly looked back and thought about getting another serving. But it was already time for his appointment with the Academy personnel.

Full of regret, he stood up and left the cafeteria.

Soon, he found himself in a small office, sitting across from an administrative worker. The worker was very friendly, and started the interview right away.

Just like Master Jet had warned him, Sunny was offered psychological counseling again. Remembering her advice, he refused, and the interview smoothly switched to questions about his Aspect.

He didn't want to give up information about his abilities, but also knew that he had to tell the worker something. Luckily, the questions were worded in a way to put Sleepers at ease. As such, most of them started with nice and polite preambles like "would you like to tell me" or "if you're willing to share", which gave Sunny an opportunity to give neutral answers.

"Would you mind telling me about the type of Aspect Ability you received, as in combat, sorcery, utility?"

He did mind, but had to be careful.

"Uh, I'm not sure. I haven't had time to understand it well."

"That's alright. Are you able to directly deal damage with your Ability?"

"I guess not? Earlier, I wasn't even able to harm a towel."

Things went on like that. In the end, Sunny shared just enough information to create an impression that his Aspect was weak, harmless and most likely having something to do with utility.

After that, he returned to his room, undressed, and went to sleep.

Sunny thought that falling asleep for the first time after the Nightmare would be weird, but in fact, it was surprisingly easy. Lying on a soft mattress, with his skin against clean bedsheets and a fluffy pillow under his head, he slept like a baby.

Early in the morning, Sunny washed up in his private bathroom and, bursting with energy, hurried to get breakfast in a happy mood.

The cafeteria was a bit crowded. After filling his plate with all kinds of delicious stuff, he quickly realized that the only place he could sit was near

the blind girl from yesterday. Her table was empty, since no one wanted to be close to her.

Sunny grimaced. It seemed that the two of them were doomed to be outcasts together for the remaining four weeks. He also felt uncomfortable in the company of someone who was practically a dead person, but there wasn't much of a choice.

Losing his good mood, he sat at the blind girl's table and gave a percursor nod to the social worker who was helping her get around. After that, he tried to pretend that they didn't exist and concentrated on his food.

However, before he could finish, a sudden commotion drew his attention.

'What's going on?'

He looked up and noticed that a lot of Sleepers were gathered around the large screen hanging on the wall of the cafeteria, their faces filled with excitement and awe. On the screen, a list of names was displayed, ranking the new batch of Sleepers from weakest to strongest, most likely deduced from the results of the interviews.

Not particularly interested, he quickly found his own name near the bottom of the list. The only Sleeper who the Academy judged to be less likely to succeed than him was the blind girl. Turns out, her name was Cassia.

But the commotion was a bit too loud to be just the result of the ranking. Curious, he moved his gaze up. The Sleepers were restless.

"How... how can this be?!"

"I'm not seeing things, right?"

"What kind of a monster is she?!"

Caster was placed in second place. And right above him, the portrait of the silver-haired girl could be clearly seen.

To the right of it, two simple lines of text were displayed:

"Name: Nephis"

"True Name: Changing Star"

Chapter 25: Wilderness Survival | Shadow Slave

So, the silver-haired girl, Nephis, also received a True Name in her First Nightmare. To get his own, Sunny had to deal with Hero and Mountain King while possessing a completely useless Aspect — an impossible feat that seemed to have pleased the Spell very much.

'I wonder how she had gotten hers.'

Sleepers in the cafeteria were struck dumb by the revelation of this achievement. They were staring at the screen with astonishment, fear and admiration. Listening to their excited whispers, Sunny felt a childish desire to scream "Me too! I have one too!".

But, of course, he kept quiet.

Looking around, he noticed Caster's gaze fixed on the screen. There was a strange, somber expression on the humorous young man's face. But the weird thing about it was that, as far as Sunny could tell, Caster wasn't looking at the line of text containing the True Name.

Instead, he was staring at the line of text that read "Nephis", as though the girl's actual name held more meaning to him than the one given by the Spell.

'Interesting. Do they know each other?'

Why would a lofty Legacy know someone who came to the Academy in a police-issued tracksuit? And speaking of Nephis... where was she?

Sunny glanced around the cafeteria and quickly noticed the silver-haired girl, who was sitting quietly in a corner with a cup of coffee in her hands. She wasn't paying a lot of attention to the commotion, seemingly immersed in her thoughts. Her grey eyes were serious and distant.

"A Sleeper with a True Name? That's impossible!"

"It's technically possible. Smile of Heaven received her True Name in the First Nightmare, I think. But yeah, I'm doubtful..."

"Maybe she lied in the interview?"

"Are you stupid? If it was that easy to deceive the administrators, the crazy pervert from yesterday would have been in the first place instead!"

Sunny's face twitched. Crazy pervert, huh...

"Well, why don't we just ask her?"

Suddenly, there was a deafening silence in the cafeteria. Following the suggestion, Sleepers stopped talking and turned around, staring at Nephis. However, no one seemed to have the courage to approach her first.

Finally sensing something, she raised her eyes and looked at them with surprise.

"Mmm. What?"

Even the blind girl, Cassia, turned in the direction of her voice.

After a couple of moments, Caster suddenly walked over and made a small bow.

"Lady Nephis. I am Caster from the Han Li clan. I see that your trial went well?"

Lady? Why is he addressing her that way? And he had to introduce himself... so, they don't know each other? Interesting.

Nephis seemed to be a little bit perplexed by the question. After thinking for a while, she smiled brightly and shrugged.

"It is what it is."

Caster awkwardly returned the smile.

"I see. I am very glad that you returned unharmed. Uh... not that I doubted your abilities."

Nephis nodded.

"Thank you."

After that, she returned to her coffee, indicating that the conversation was over or simply oblivious to everyone's attention.

Sunny sighed.

'How mysterious.'

There were a lot of thoughts on his mind. However, none of them could distract him from the most important thing... breakfast. A few seconds later, he had forgotten all about the awkward dynamic between Caster and Nephis and was happily shoveling down his food.

The Wilderness Survival classroom was spacious, tastefully decorated... and completely empty. Sunny even thought that he was mistaken, but then spotted a gloomy instructor sitting behind a wide wooden desk. Noticing him, the instructor perked up.

"Come in, young man!"

He was a lively old man with messy grey hair, absentminded eyes and a pair of bushy eyebrows that seemed to jump around on their own.

"I'm Awakened Julius. You can call me Teacher Julius. Sit down, sit down! What's your name?"

Sunny obediently sat down.

"It's Sunless."

Julius raised his eyebrows.

"Ah! What an ominous name. But that is good, very good. After all, we have to deal with a lot of ominous things!"

Sunny carefully looked around.

"Uh... I'm sorry, Teacher. Did I come too early?"

"No, no... you're right on time."

"Are other students late?"

The instructor grunted with incredible contempt.

"No one else is coming. Those brutes are only interested in swinging their fists and swords around. Very few are smart like you and know the true value of knowledge..."

Oh. So it was that unpopular. Sunny inwardly sighed, hoping that he won't regret the decision to abandon combat training in favor of this course.

"Say, young man... why did you choose Wilderness Survival, of all things?"

There was no point in hiding the true reason. Not that Sunny would have been able to anyway...

"The Awakened that monitored me during the First Nightmare, Master Jet, had advised me to study it above all things."

"A very wise advice! That Master truly knows what's important... wait. Did you say Jet?"

His eyes widened.

"Soul Reaper Jet? That murderous savage?! Hm. Who would have thought that a barbarian like her would know the value of intricate knowledge."

Soul Reaper? Sunny's curiosity was picked.

"Teacher, do you know Master Jet?"

Julius carefully looked behind his back before answering:

"Who doesn't know the Soul Reaper? She might not be the most powerful Awakened out there, but she is certainly one of the most feared. That's because her Aspect Abilities disregard flesh and target soul cores directly. Which means that no amount of armor, damage resistance and physical protection can stop them."

He leaned forward.

"The only good thing is that she's young and not likely to become a Saint anytime soon, or even ever. Yes, luckily, there's a very low probability that she'll ever advance."

Sunny blinked.

"Why?"

Julius looked at him as though trying to comprehend how someone could be so ignorant.

"Because of her problematic personality, of course! Who would want to help a psychopathic killer become a Saint? You need a team of outstanding companions and a lot of support to attempt conquering the Third Nightmare. Soul Reaper Jet isn't... wait!"

Suddenly, Julius frowned and leaned back.

"Why am I gossiping with you? You're too young to know such things! More than that, it's not in my character to badmouth others behind their backs!"

'I would beg to differ,' Sunny thought sarcastically, but didn't say anything out loud.

He already got a lot of juicy information out of Teacher Julius.

'Maybe choosing Wilderness Survival was the right choice after all.'

"Let's get back to your curriculum. What other courses are you taking?"

Sunny sighed.

"None. For the next four weeks, I'll be fully concentrated on Wilderness Survival."

Julius stared at him for a whole minute, an expression of utter astonishment written clearly on his face. Then, slowly, an excited gleam appeared in his eyes. Finally, he grinned.

"Wonderful! This is wonderful! You're such an astute young man! Don't you worry. In four whole weeks, I will make you immortal..."

Sunny's lessons with Teacher Julius started pleasantly and without much tension, but just an hour later, he felt like his head was ready to explode. There was so much new information, and all of it was so strange and counterintuitive for someone who had never left the walled-off, sheltered confines of the city.

From time to time, Julius gaped at Sunny's lack of knowledge and relevant experience. However, he had a good attitude and an endless enthusiasm for teaching. Whenever Sunny stumbled, he would patiently slow down and allow his student to catch up.

The curriculum that Julius planned out was practically insane. There was an endless amount of theoretical knowledge to learn, practical lessons both in virtual reality and the real world, numerous subjects and weird things to study. There were even several lessons dedicated exclusively to learning the basics of several dead languages of the Dream Realm!

'Why would I need to learn new languages?' Sunny thought with self-pity. 'The Spell automatically translates everything!'

But Julius was uncompromising.

"The Spell is not a translator! Do you think it has the time to express the intricacies of human speech? Let's say you're seeking shelter in a ruin and

find an inscription that reads "certain death ahead". There are thirty words for death in the rune language! Just by knowing the runes, you'll be able to deduce what kind of danger there is!"

On the first day, they studied until the sun was about to set. Only then did Julius decide to let Sunny go. Mentally exhausted and lamenting the fact that he had to miss lunch and dinner, Sunny decided to gently remind his teacher about the importance of food for maintaining high levels of concentration tomorrow.

After returning to his room, he fell on a chair and stared blankly into the distance for a while. Then, as though remembering something, Sunny turned to his shadow.

Right. He had a lot to accomplish before supper.

He observed the shadow for a few seconds and then grinned.

"Let's see what you can really do..."

Chapter 26: Changing Star | Shadow Slave

Sunny was pretty sure that his shadow was capable of much more than just being a silent follower. After all, the Spell had described it as being an invaluable helper. It was now up to him to find out how exactly Shadow Control could be of help.

As in many other matters having to do with Aspects, there was a certain level of instinctual understanding buried deep inside his subconscious. This understanding was either given to him by the Spell or was something innate to every Awakened. Sunny just had to sense the subconscious knowledge and learn how to put it into practice.

Once again, he concentrated on sensing his body and spirit, then commanded the shadow to perform a series of simple motions. With each of them, he was growing more and more familiar with the feeling of controlling the shadow.

Pretty soon, it was as natural to him as breathing and walking. The shadow felt like a part of his body.

Satisfied with this initial result, Sunny carefully gave it a new command. Without pause, the shadow separated itself from the soles of his shoes, walked to the other end of the room and turned around, staring at him in slightly mocking silence.

Sunny was left without a shadow.

'This is not scientific at all,' he thought with an amused smile.

Science never really applied to anything having to do with the Spell, after all.

As the shadow walked away, he felt a very weird split happening in his mind. It was like his perception had separated into two distinct sources. One was his body, the other — his shadow.

With a bit of trying, he managed to focus on the second source. Instantly, his vision blurred.

"Whoa!" Sunny blurted, surprised.

"Whoa!" the shadow heard from the other end of the room.

Sunny blinked. In his mind, there now existed two pictures. One was of his room's door, with an indifferent shadow standing in front of it. The other was of a pale young man sitting on a chair, wide-eyed and bewildered.

'That's me.'

He raised an arm and waved it in the air. Simultaneously, the pale young man raised and waved his.

'I can perceive the world through my shadow?'

He sat for a while, thinking. An ability like that opened up a lot of possibilities. With his [Child of Shadows] attribute allowing him to see and move stealthily in the darkness and [Shadow Control] allowing him to send out a sneaky shadow as a scout, he was pretty much a perfect spy.

A spy was someone who gathered information without exposing themselves to a lot of risk. A role like that suited Sunny's taste very much.

Of course, spies were also able to strike from the shadows with deadly precision. Armed with information, they were masterful ambushers. With the prior knowledge of the opponent's weaknesses, their attacks were surgical and lethal.

But any direct confrontation would mean putting himself in danger, so Sunny wasn't very keen on becoming an assassin. After all, his Aspect still lacked the means of directly enhancing his combat performance.

'Shall we test it?'

He looked at the shadow and gave it a command. With an exaggerated sigh, the shadow bent down and nimbly slid under the door.

Instantly, he could see both the room and the hallway outside. Sunny closed his eyes to focus on the picture projected from the shadow.

Moving stealthily from one shadow to another, it glided down the hallway. With a bit of timing and consideration, his scout was practically invisible. Sunny passed by a couple of Sleepers and listened in on their conversation. Not finding it very interesting, he continued forward.

Finally, the shadow stopped at a corner. To its left were the elevators, to its right — the way to the girls' dormitory.

All sorts of provocative images immediately entered Sunny's head.

'Oh my!' he thought, blushing.

Yes, with this ability, it was also very easy to fall into utter depravity! But no, no. He couldn't do it. Not because of some high moral principles...

It's just that, with his reputation of a pervert, the chances of being asked if he had done something unbecoming were pretty high. So he needed the ability to honestly answer "no".

'So... I probably shouldn't. Right?'

Right?

'Of course you're right! Don't even think about it!'

Back in his room, Sunny sighed with a lot of regret. Then he directed his scout to hide in the shadow of a passing Sleeper and followed him to the elevators.

Some time later, Sunny's shadow was hiding in a corner of a large dojo. He was observing his fellow Sleepers who, under the guidance of Instructor Rock, were going through the motions of the introductory combat class.

Today was mainly dedicated to testing their general competency and abilities. After that, the Sleepers were going to be separated into groups based on their level, such as novice, advanced or expert, as well as their

weapon of choice. Some would be assigned a personal tutor or paired together.

Currently, Sleepers were taking turns delivering their strongest punches to a wide plate attached to a special measuring machine. After each strike, the machine would display a number corresponding to the Sleeper's physical strength.

In theory, a machine like that was not hard to build. However, considering that many of Sleepers had combat-oriented Aspects that enhanced their might in a variety of ways, it was actually a marvel of engineering and durability.

Their technique and training also affected the final result.

Most people were getting numbers ranging from ten to fourteen. It was considered a good result, something that only the most athletic people could reach. However, a lot of Sleepers, obviously those with enhancing Aspects, were able to achieve a score of fifteen or even sixteen.

'I would probably get ten or eleven,' Sunny thought, feeling a little bored.

Then he suddenly perked up, noticing that it was turn for Nephis, the highest-rated Sleeper of their batch, to strike the plate.

The slender girl approached the machine and, without much preparation, delivered a sudden, crushing blow. Sunny wasn't very well-versed in martial arts, but even he was impressed by the flawless economy and speed of her execution.

'She had a lot of training.'

Nephis was becoming more and more intriguing. What's her actual background?

After a short pause, the machine displayed the result: sixteen. Sunny felt a bit disappointed.

'Not that impressive. I was expecting more.'

She was the proud bearer of a True Name, after all!

After that, only Caster remained. This time, Sunny couldn't even see the flying fist — it was just too fast. The machine trembled and took more time calculating. Finally, two numbers appeared.

Twenty-one.

Everyone gaped at the display, stunned. More than a few admiring looks were thrown at Caster, who simply bowed and took a step back. Instructor Rock smiled.

"Not bad. Now, we will move to sparring and evaluate your general level of training. I need two volunteers to begin."

Nephis was the first to step forward and walk to the center of the ring. A couple of seconds later, a tall and extremely muscular Sleeper followed and faced her.

"The rules are simple. Make your opponent's back touch the floor or throw them out of the ring. Use whatever abilities and techniques you find appropriate."

'Oh, the show is starting!'

Watching Sleepers fight each other was not only entertaining, but could also provide Sunny with knowledge of their powers. Back in the room, he leaned forward and rested his chin on his palms.

'Go Nephis!'

The tall guy attacked without wasting any time. His muscles bulged, threatening to tear the soft fabric of his white dobok. He advanced like an unstoppable mountain, sending a vicious kick flying.

... A second later, he was lying on the floor with a dumbstruck look on his face. Nephis didn't even change her stance.

Instructor Rock gave her a cheerful look and grinned.

"Next."

What followed could only be described as a massacre. One after another, Nephis managed to defeat almost every single Sleeper present in the dojo. She didn't seem to be faster or stronger than them, but each time someone entered the ring to fight her, they would inevitably end up beaten and thrown to the ground.

Sunny watched the process with a growing sense of amusement. However, at some point, even he felt a bit of unease.

Nephis moved with the calm precision of a battle machine. Her technique was clean, graceful and ruthless. No matter what type of attack was thrown at her, she was able to either predict or instantly react to it, then deflect and turn it against the attacker with the minimum amount of effort.

It didn't matter whether her opponent was poor, rich or a Legacy. Everyone would end up dealt with in a matter of seconds.

What's more, through the whole process, the composed expression on her face didn't even change once. It was like Nephis was made out of metal.

'Is... is she even human?' Sunny thought, suddenly apprehensive.

What was he going to do if this Changing Star were to end up as his enemy?

The best course of action would be to run away. Or better yet, try not to antagonize her, to begin with. After all, the sun was also a star, and shadows didn't mix well with sunlight.

Finally, Caster was the last one remaining — once again. However, he didn't seem to be perturbed by the miserable failure of every other Sleeper. With a soft smile on his lips, the young man stepped into the ring.

Caster and Nephis faced each other. Their eyes locked for a few seconds, and then Caster slightly bowed.

"Lady Nephis. Please excuse me in advance."

'What is he going to...'

... A moment later, Sunny opened his eyes in shock.

Chapter 27: Measure Of Power

It seemed like Caster suddenly ceased to exist.

However, it was only an illusion. The truth was that he was just moving so fast that the human eye wasn't able to keep up with his movements. If it wasn't for the special properties of Shadow Sight, Sunny wouldn't have been able to perceive anything either.

Even then, he only noticed a hazy blur streaking through the air.

In a fraction of a second, Caster covered the distance between him and Nephis and delivered a devastating blow. However, despite his astonishing speed, she somehow managed to react in time, slightly turning her body to deflect the strike.

But it still wasn't enough. Although Nephis had managed to avoid being hit squarely in her center of gravity, Caster's fist ended up connecting with her shoulder, sending the girl into a spin.

Not wasting any time, Caster disappeared again. His plan was very simple: while Nephis was still under the impression that the enemy was in front of her, he was going to use his unnatural swiftness to circle around and attack from the back.

The young man appeared behind the oblivious girl, ready to finish the fight with one decisive strike. Just as he planned, she seemed to be preparing to attack in the direction he had been seen just a split second ago. Gratified, Caster shifted his weight, putting it all into his fist.

However, at the last moment, Nephis suddenly changed her stance and threw her elbow back with frightening force.

Caster's eye widened. It was all a feint!

And now that he had committed to a strike, there was no simple way to stop. No matter how fast he was, he was still subject to the laws of inertia. The elbow was approaching his face with a profound feeling of inevitability.

And yet, Caster still managed to avoid it, even if it was just by a hair's breadth. His speed advantage was just too big.

He then proceeded to trip and push Nephis, sending her flying to the ground. However, just before she was about to hit the mats, the young man carefully grabbed the collar of her dobok and gently pulled, slowing down the fall and allowing Nephis to land on the floor without any impact.

Lying on her back, the girl blinked a couple of times and looked up at him. The whole altercation lasted no more than two seconds.

Back in his room, Sunny opened his eyes in shock.

'So that's an Ascended Aspect? That's... that's cheating!'

A Sleeper had no business being that fast. The powers bestowed upon them by the Spell were supposed to be in their infancy. But... Caster was a Legacy, after all.

Who knew how many soul shards were fed to him prior to enrolling into the Academy?

Back in the dojo, Instructor Rock grunted and gave Caster a nod. Nephis slowly rose to her feet.

The rest of the Sleepers were gawking at the young man with reverence, whispering among each other in hushed tones. It seemed that his performance left them with a deep impression.

However, Caster himself wasn't very elated. He glanced at Nephis with an unreadable expression.

That was because, unlike the rest of them, he came to a certain realization. The truth of the matter was known only to him, Nephis, Instructor Rock... and Sunny, who was very observant and quickly picked up on such things.

The thing that Sleepers failed to notice was that Nephis did not use her Aspect Ability when facing Caster. In fact, she had not used it at any point during today's testing. No one even knew what her Ability was.

And yet, despite his powerful Aspect, Caster barely managed to clutch a victory against her.

'What a monster,' Sunny thought, full of unease.

The shadow hiding in the corner of the dojo seemed to agree with him wholeheartedly.

After that, the introductory combat class was over. Sore from the beating they received, Sleepers headed for the showers. Sunny waited for a bit and then directed his shadow to sneak into the boy's locker room.

He wasn't very interested in watching a bunch of teenagers changing clothes, but there was a slight possibility that Caster would either comment on his duel with Nephis or answer some questions about his incredible Aspect Ability.

Just as he had expected, the young man was surrounded by a group of newly converted fans. They were congratulating him on his victory, full of adoration and excitement. However, Caster himself seemed to be in a bad mood. His expression was somber, and there was a grim heaviness in his eyes.

In fact, his face grew darker with each praise he received.

"Caster, that was incredible!"

"You Aspect is overpowered, am I right?"

"That Nephis girl stood no chance at all!"

"True Name? Who needs that? She's just a wanna-be!"

Finally, Caster raised his head and pierced the last boy who had spoken with a cold look. That boy, just like him, was one of the few Legacies in their batch of Sleepers. He frowned, surprised by Caster's reaction.

"What is it?"

Caster gritted his teeth.

"I might have expected such behavior from them, but you should know better."

The other Legacy raised an eyebrow.

"Why? Is there something special about that peasant girl?"

Caster's eyes widened.

"Peasant... peasant girl? Do you really not know who she is?"

'No!' Sunny thought impatiently. 'So just get to it and say it out loud!'

Luckily, the arrogant Sleeper had the same sentiment.

Caster opened his mouth several times, as though not sure what to say. Finally, he shook his head and answered:

"She is Nephis of the Immortal Flame clan."

As soon as he said that, the arrogant Legacy became deathly pale. Not paying him any attention, Caster continued.

"I trust that I don't need to tell you about her grandfather. Her parents were Smile of Heaven and Broken Sword."

In his room, Sunny almost fell from the chair.

Even he knew who Immortal Flame and Broken Sword were. The former was the first human to conquer the Second Nightmare and become a Master. The latter — the first one to conquer the Third Nightmare and become a Saint.

They, as well as their companions, were among the most famous heroes of the human race, someone who had managed to change history with their

own two hands. If what Caster said was true, then Nephis wasn't just an aristocrat... she was royalty!

No wonder he addressed her as "lady". Why didn't he just call her "princess" instead?

But that didn't make any sense!

Echoing his thoughts, the pale-faced Sleeper asked in trembling voice:

"Then why... why is she so..."

Caster sighed.

"Because they're all dead. The Immortal Flame clan is long gone."

For a few moments, the locker room was completely silent. Caster looked down.

"She's the only one left."

Late at night, when everyone was already asleep, Sunny furtively entered the dojo. Looking around, he made sure that no one was there and then curiously approached the ring where Nephis and others had been tested earlier. He stopped at the center of the ring and stood there for a while, remembering how she had dealt with dozens of Sleepers of their batch before being defeated by Caster.

"Monsters... both of them are monsters!" he mumbled, bitter and disheartened.

Shaking his head, Sunny left the ring and then he looked at his shadow.

"Do you agree?"

The shadow hesitated for a few seconds, then stuck out its chest and crossed its arms, trying to appear cocky, disdainful and unperturbed. However, its

act wasn't very convincing.

"Yeah, you're right. Exactly! What's the big deal anyway?"

Both Immortal Flame and Broken Sword, Nephis's father and grandfather, were as monstrous in terms of power as one can get. But they still failed to protect their family from being eviscerated. So, power wasn't that important in the end.

Even royalty was not safe from the cruelty of the world.

Sunny sighed and proceeded to the measuring machine. Making a fist, he swung it and delivered his best punch. The machine hummed for a few seconds and then displayed a single number.

Nine.

"Oh, come on! I deserve a ten, at least!"

Feeling very indignant, he struck the plate again, almost hurting his fingers. However, the result was the same.

"Damn it!"

Sunny paced for a bit, trying to control his anger. It seems he was destined to be a weakling. After all, the force of the strike depended on mass and acceleration. Acceleration could be improved with technique and exercise, but mass was something he had little control of.

He was already done growing, and his height was not going to drastically increase in the future. No matter how hard Sunny trained, he was always going to be a lightweight.

'How is this fair?'

Suddenly filled with resentment, he punched the plate again, putting all of his frustration into this one strike.

At that moment, a strange instinct suddenly awakened in Sunny's mind.

Following the command of this instinct, his shadow flowed up and wrapped itself around his hand, sticking to it like a black glove. In the next moment, the punch connected.

The machine trembled from the force of the strike. Sunny's yelped in pain and took a step back, cradling his bruised fist. After a while, the result was displayed. However, it wasn't a nine anymore.

It wasn't even a ten.

It was eighteen.

He looked at the displayed number for a long time, expressionless.

Then, a wide grin slowly appeared on Sunny's face.

"I see. So that why. Of course!"

He clenched his fist again, looking down at the black, shadowy glove.

Ah, what an invaluable helper indeed.

"Now we're talking!"

Chapter 28: Training Montage | Shadow Slave

Days flew by.

Sunny only had four weeks to prepare himself for the journey into the Dream Realm, so there wasn't even a minute to spare. He was relentless, pushing his body and mind to the limits in an attempt to absorb as much knowledge and skills as possible in that short amount of time.

In the day, he studied with Teacher Julius, slowly learning how to survive and take care of himself in the absence of civilization. Their lessons ranged from comparatively simple, like various ways to produce fire, to much more obscure and esoteric, like celestial navigation.

What was so hard about celestial navigation?

Well, as it turned out, the Dream Realm was not consistent in terms of star geography. Different regions had different stars and constellations, as well as a different number of moons. While the sun seemed to be the same, its behavior was highly unpredictable.

Still, with sufficient knowledge, one could find ways to study the skies and subsequently navigate themselves.

Most of these lessons were, supposedly, already included in the various school curriculums and known to the majority of Sleepers. However, learning something from a textbook and learning the same thing from an actual Awakened were two completely different matters.

Teacher Julius had a habit of going much more in-depth when explaining his subject. Thanks to this time-consuming habit of his, Sunny not only learned about the "what", but also often gained glimpses into the "why". This nascent understanding of the underlying principles of the Dream Realm environments gave him the ability to face any situation with at least some measure of readiness.

Even the lessons in dead languages, which Sunny had initially judged to be useless, turned out to be much more interesting than he could ever imagine. This was, in large part, because it concerned the Spell itself — after all, the Spell communicated with humans in one of those dead languages.

By knowing the language, he was able to understand its various remarks and descriptions better. The simplest example of this was Nephis and her True Name, "Changing Star". While technically correct, this translation failed to properly convey the exact meaning.

By understanding the grammatical structure of the rune language, it was easy to extrapolate and see that the more correct translation would have been "Star of Change". More than that, there were different runes for "change", each with its own connotation. Depending on what exact rune was used to relay the meaning of the name, it could also mean "Ruinous Star" or "Star of Misfortune".

A small change in wording and connotation could mean a world of difference in real life.

Sunny, who had never seriously studied before, found the process of acquiring vast amounts of theoretical knowledge strange, numbing and exhausting.

However, in a sense, it was also exhilarating. After all, knowledge was something that only the privileged had access to. It was also this authority over knowledge that kept them in the position of power, creating a vicious circle of inequality.

The poor had no opportunity to study, and without the advantage of good education, they had no way to stop being poor.

The weirdest part about all of this was that Sunny was now one of those privileged people. More than that, he was at the pinnacle of social hierarchy. Not only had he gained access to an unlimited amount of knowledge, but even his basic needs like food and shelter were also taken care of by the government, allowing him to fully focus on the single goal of developing himself as an Awakened.

This sudden transformation would have sent him into a whirlpool of philosophical reflection if he had any time to spare.

But he didn't, because Teacher Julius also insisted on holding practical lessons every other day. Even if some of them had to be done in virtual reality simulations, he insisted on using the full immersion stations with enhanced physical feedback. As a result, Sunny was bone-tired and utterly exhausted.

The good thing was that with such amount of exercise, coupled with his newly reforged body, Sunny had never been in better shape. Even without combat training, he could feel his strength, stamina and agility improving by leaps and bounds.

Basically, the peculiar rebirth he had experienced after completing the First Nightmare had enhanced the innate potential of his body, bringing it to the peak of the human condition. However, it was up to him to realize that potential with sweat, effort and a lot of hard work. Practical application of wilderness survival techniques provided him with the opportunity to do so.

And as though this wasn't enough, Sunny secretly collected information about other Sleepers and practiced shadow control every night.

His shadow was independent enough to be sent on scouting missions without his direct control. It would sneak here and there, listening in on the conversations and observing different classes where Sleepers had to demonstrate their Aspect Abilities.

Then, after Sunny had finished his supper and returned to his room, it would come back and share everything it had heard and seen during the day.

The only problem with this arrangement was that the shadow, despite its outward snarkiness, turned out to be rather naive. It didn't quite understand how the human world worked, and as such, often failed to distinguish between useful information and meaningless chatter.

So, most of the time, Sunny would receive nothing of value or juicy gossip instead of important secrets.

This is how he learned that in the Sleeper Center, romance was in the air. After all, there were a hundred beautiful young people locked underground in close proximity to each other, with the added spice of a deathly threat hanging above their heads. Many felt that life was short and it was their time to seize the day. Passion bloomed in the shadow of approaching danger.

Sunny was excluded from this whole side of the thing, of course. Firstly, he had already positioned himself to be perceived as an unlikable lunatic. Secondly, he simply had no time for anything except for his lessons and training. And lastly, he was wary of getting too close to anybody, afraid that a situation would arise where he would have no choice but to divulge his True Name.

Apart from gathering information and slowly learning about the scope and details of various Aspect Abilities, and, to a lesser extent, Flaws, he was also experimenting with Shadow Control.

The results were very promising. He quickly found out that his shadow was able to enhance various objects and not only his body. If it wrapped itself around a weapon, the weapon strike harder and deliver more damage. If it was applied to an armor, the armor would become sturdier and harder to break.

The enhancement was rather substantial, too. It was roughly twice as much as the initial value.

All in all, this Ability, if used correctly, could make him a powerhouse among the Sleepers. Many combat Aspects could deliver more speed or damage, many could provide more defense and protection, but none were as well-rounded and versatile as Shadow Slave.

With the added utility of Shadow Sight, Shadow Step and Shadow Scout, it was truly incredible.

Just like that, day after day passed, slowly turning into weeks.

Before Sunny even knew it, the winter solstice was already here.

Chapter 29: The Last Day On Earth

On the day of the winter solstice, Sunny woke up feeling tired and drowsy. No matter how much he tried to shake off this listlessness, it wouldn't go away. In the end, he just stayed in the bed for a while, wrapping himself in a blanket.

He was already familiar with this feeling of neverending, ensnaring sleepiness. It was the same in the days before his First Nightmare. It was also quite similar to what he had experienced while slowly dying of hypothermia on the slopes of the Black Mountain.

Remembering the cold embrace of approaching death, Sunny couldn't help but shiver.

This was his last day on Earth... at least for a while. By nightfall, the Spell was going to take him away once again, this time to challenge the vast expanse of the Dream Realm. What was he going to face in that ruined magical world? Would luck be on his side this time, or would there be another disaster?

'Ugh.'

There was no point in guessing. He had already done everything in his power to prepare for the inevitable. He studied hard, trained hard, and kept his secret safe. His Aspect was better than most, and his will to survive was long tempered by the harsh reality of the outskirts and the even harsher ordeal of the First Nightmare.

All in all, he was ready.

With a sigh, Sunny got out of bed and went along with his morning routine. If this was going to be his last hot shower in a long while, he was going to really enjoy it. If it was going to be his last scrumptious breakfast for the time being...

Actually, he had no appetite.

The cafeteria was full of Sleepers, but no one was talking. Everybody was in low spirits and seemed to be uncharacteristically introspective. There was

no usual laughter or boisterous conversations — only the Legacies remained calm and collected. However, even they kept to themselves.

Sunny thought about the last time he was preparing to enter the Spell and, with a bit of trepidation, approached the coffee machine. During his stay in the Academy, he had long discovered that a lot of people were in a habit of adding sugar and milk to their coffee. So, on this auspicious day, he decided to give it another try.

After all, it was nice to have a tradition.

A few minutes later, he had taken his usual seat near Cassia, the blind girl. Despite their compulsory closeness, they had not talked to each other even once, just like two strangers forced to share the same space by circumstances beyond their control. Sunny did not see a reason for anything to change today.

However, as soon as he took the first seep of coffee, Cassia suddenly turned her head and stared at him with her beautiful, blind blue eyes.

Unnerved, Sunny looked around, checking if someone else had attracted her attention, and, after making sure that there wasn't anyone standing behind him, asked:

"W—what?"

Cassia was silent, as though hesitating if she should reply, and then suddenly said:

"Happy Birthday."

'What?'

Sunny frowned, trying to comprehend the meaning behind her words. Then, a flash of surprise appeared on his face.

'Oh, right. It's my birthday today.'

He had completely forgotten about it. He was turning seventeen today.

'Wait... how did she know about this?'

Sunny gave the blind girl a strange look, opened his mouth, and then decided to let the issue go. She was just too creepy.

"Uh... thanks."

With a nod, Cassia turned away and seemingly lost interest in having a conversation once again.

Which was for the better.

Sunny returned to his coffee, finding it not too bad this time. Of course, sugar and cream were making most of the work. However, he did feel a little bit more awake after drinking it.

'Seventeen, huh?'

Sunny was never sure that he would make it to this age alive. And yet, despite everything, he did. Life was sure unpredictable sometimes.

If anyone would have told him a year ago that he was going to celebrate his seventeenth birthday by drinking real coffee with real milk and sugar, he would have laughed in their face. But now it was a reality.

Unwillingly, Sunny remembered all the people who used to celebrate his birthdays with him, a long time ago. Before his mood turned sour, he decisively dispelled these thoughts and forced himself to smile.

'This is not bad. Let's do it again next year, when I'm already an Awakened.'

Cheering himself up like that, he finished his coffee and left the cafeteria.

There were no classes today, but he still visited the Wilderness Survival classroom and said his goodbyes to Teacher Julius. The old man got pretty emotional when sending him off. He gave Sunny "one last tip" a dozen or so times in a row and even promised to apply for a research assistant position to be opened after the young man had become a full Awakened.

Sunny left thanking him for his time and patience.

After that, there wasn't much to do.

When the sun was close to setting, Instructor Rock gathered them in the foyer of the Sleeper Center and led them outside.

In the snowy parks that surrounded the white building, other Awakened were leading their own batches of Sleepers to the same destination. It was the Academy's medical center.

The center looked more like a shrine than a hospital. Its interior contained both highly advanced technology as well as some of the best Healers among the Awakened. For the duration of their first journey into the Dream Realm, the bodies of Sleepers would be kept safe in specially designed pods and sustained by the magical powers of those Healers if anything unfortunate were to happen on the other side of the Spell.

Of course, whether or not they would wake up in the end wholly depended on the Sleepers themselves.

To Sunny's surprise, after entering the medical center, Instructor Rock did not take them directly to the wing containing Sleeper pods. Instead, he led them to a comparatively deserted floor and then opened the doors to a spacious gallery that was brightly illuminated by the beautiful crimson rays of the setting sun.

There, they saw rows and rows of wheelchairs. In each wheelchair, there was a person with a blank, strangely peaceful expression on their face. All these people were completely silent, motionless, and still. They did not show any reaction to the appearance of guests.

They all seemed to be... empty.

In the eerie silence, Sunny felt his hair standing up and a creeping terror sipping deep into his heart.

Instructor Rock looked at the empty people with solemn eyes.

"There is a reason I brought you all here. Look well and remember. Some of you may know who these people are... for those of you who don't, they are called Hollow."

He gritted his teeth.

"Each one of them was once either a Sleeper or an Awakened. Some of them were weak, some of them were strong. Some were even incredibly powerful. All of them have perished in the Dream Realm."

'Their... their souls are gone,' Sunny realized, horrified.

'If you're lucky, once your spirit is destroyed, your body dies with it. But if not, you'll become just like them. Hollow.'

Instructor Rock glanced in the direction where Caster and Nephis stood, and then added:

"So don't die out there."

Half an hour later, Sleepers had been led to their personal rooms and were preparing to enter the pods.

In one of the rooms, the blind girl, Cassia, was helplessly trying to orient herself in the unfamiliar space, touching the walls and strange pieces of machinery with her hands. Tears were streaming down her beautiful, doll-like face.

In the other room, proud Legacy Caster was staring listlessly at the floor. His lips were moving, repeating one strange phrase over and over again. He was trembling.

Somewhere else, Changing Star Nephis, the last daughter of the Immortal Flame clan, was looking down at her hands. Underneath her skin, soft white radiance was slowly growing brighter and brighter. Her face was contorted in a grimace of harrowing agony.

And finally, there was a room where Shadow Slave Sunless, Lost from Light, turned away from the sleeping pod and glanced down at his shadow.

"Well? Are you ready?"

The shadow shrugged and didn't answer.

Sunny sighed.

"Yeah, me too."

With that, he stepped forward and climbed into the pod.

In the vast echoing darkness, he heard:

[Welcome to the Dream Realm, Sunless!]

Chapter 30: Starless Void | Shadow Slave

Sunny was expecting to first look at the place where his arrival to the Dream Realm was going to take place from above, just like it had happened at the beginning of the First Nightmare. Back then, time had magically moved in reverse, giving him an opportunity to see hints of what he was going to face.

Instead, immediately after hearing the greetings of the Spell, Sunny found himself blind and drowning. As he instinctively tried to open his mouth to scream, salty water rushed inside, making him choke and twitch.

More than that, he couldn't see anything. No, it's not that he couldn't see — it's just there was no source of light around. Usually, darkness wasn't a problem for Sunny, but, for some reason, his sight wasn't working anymore. Maybe the seawater he was submerged in was blocking it.

If it wasn't for the special space perception that the affinity to shadows gave him, he would have been completely disoriented. With its help, though, he barely managed to understand which side was down, and which side was up.

Luckily, Teacher Julius's lessons had included swimming. Swearing to thank both the old man and Master Jet once he came back, Sunny forced himself to stay calm and began to swim upward.

In a few long and tense seconds, his head broke through the surface of the water. Sunny was finally able to draw in a deep, hoarse breath.

'Breathe, breathe. You're still alive!'

After sucking in enough air to soothe his burning lungs and compose himself to a certain degree, Sunny carefully spun in the water, trying to take in his surroundings.

What met him was an endless, jet-black expanse of undulating waves. Above them was an empty black sky. There was no moon, no stars, just a

dark vastness of repressive nothingness. Sunny blinked a few times, cold dread taking hold of his heart.

'This is... a sea? An ocean? Was I dropped in the middle of an ocean?'

No, it couldn't be. There had to be solid ground somewhere nearby!

As he was gripped by a momentary panic, a remote sound suddenly drew his attention. Sunny turned around and saw a triangular dorsal fin moving in his direction. Luckily, it was still hundreds and hundreds of meters away.

'Wait... if it's so far away... then how come I can see it so clearly?'

Despite being submerged in water, Sunny still felt like there was suddenly cold sweat all over his body. By his estimation, that dorsal fin was at least five meters tall. It was rapidly approaching, growing visibly larger with each second.

'Damn you, Spell!'

With eyes full of horror, Sunny spun again, desperately trying to find something — anything! — to save him. And there, a short distance away, he finally noticed a black mass protruding slightly above the water.

Not wasting even a second on thinking, he started to swing his arms and legs, swimming in the direction of the black mass with a considerable speed. However, no matter how fast he swam, the giant shadow of the unknown creature was closing the distance between them much faster.

A small part of Sunny's mind managed to preserve its rationality even when faced with this boundless, primal fear. Not allowing himself to slip entirely into panic, Sunny tried to think, and then silently commanded his own shadow to wrap itself around his body. Instantly, his speed increased twofold.

Just seconds before the unknown colossus got to him, Sunny reached the black mass, stretched out his hands, and pulled himself out of the water. He rolled away from the edge, scratching his skin on the uneven rocks, and

jumped in fright when the whole surface underneath him shuddered, as though something massive had collided with it.

As Sunny backed out, terrifying jaws appeared from the water, with rows and rows of giant teeth, each one as long as he was tall. He opened his eyes wide, understanding that the rock he had climbed on was not tall enough to save him from the monster.

'Why is it even trying to eat me?! I'm too small to be considered a filling snack for something this enormous!'

... However, before the monster had a chance to attack, a colossal tentacle suddenly broke through the water and rose into the air like some strange, black tower. Before too long, it fell down, entangling the owner of the giant maw and pulling it back under the water.

Sunny lost the feeling in his legs and plopped on the ground, his mouth opened. His whole body was shaking.

A few seconds later, the dark sea was calm again, as though nothing has happened. The indifferent waves continued to move silently under the lightless sky.

'So, it wasn't trying to eat me,' he realized, frozen.

'It was trying to run away.'

A few minutes later, Sunny was pretty sure that nothing was going to devour him, at least not immediately. With that certainty, he was finally in a state of mind to stop trembling and explore his surroundings a little.

The black mass he climbed onto turned out to be a single stone platform of around twelve meters in diameter. Its surface was mostly flat, covered with grooves, and somewhat dry. Due to the regular shape of its edges, it seemed more like something man-made than a natural formation. But then again,

here in the Dream Realm, it was hard to be sure that something "man-made" was actually made by humans, as opposed to...

Better not to think about it.

The platform wasn't connected to anything, existing as a tiny island in the sea of darkness. There wasn't anything else above the water for as far as Sunny was able to see. After discovering that fact, he also realized something else.

It was that he was wet, cold, and completely naked.

'Huh.'

In his defense, the clothing situation was the last thing one would think about when trying to save themselves from abyssal monsters. Also, it's not like someone was here to witness his stark paleness and private bits.

Still, it was sort of cold.

Sunny summoned the Puppeteer's Shroud and watched as dark-grey garments covered his body. It even came with a pair of high, soft-soled leather boots. Clad in grey fabric and lusterless leather, he suddenly felt much safer.

Not to mention, warm.

After that, Sunny sat down in the middle of the platform, as far away from water as he could, and tried to remember the unique characteristic of every explored region of the Dream Realm he could think of.

Unfortunately, none of them matched this starless, dark void.

'Of course not,' he thought with a bit of resentment. 'Even if some unlucky humans had ever come here, I doubt that they were able to return to the real world alive.'

Not with those things hiding underwater.

Not yet desperate enough to leave the platform and try to swim away in search of land, Sunny decided to wait and see. Maybe something was going to change as time went by.

With a soft sigh, he habitually looked for his shadow. However, due to the total darkness that surrounded him, it couldn't really be seen. He just barely felt its presence.

"This must be a paradise for you, right? All this gloom and not a star in sight!"

The shadow, of course, did not answer.

"Anyway... good job earlier."

With a nod, Sunny lay down, using his hands as a pillow. Not thinking about much, he stared into the black sky and waited. The sound of the undulating waves was, actually, quite relaxing.

After a while, he closed his eyes and listened. Minutes merged together, growing into hours.

... Suddenly, Sunny caught a slight change in the sound of the sea. It was as though something was shifting. He opened his eyes and noticed that one corner of the sky was slowly turning grey. Soon, a glimpse of a pale sun could be seen rising above the horizon.

A new day had come to the starless void.

And with it, the dark sea suddenly surged.

Chapter 31: Low Tide | Shadow Slave

The black, opaque water suddenly surged and seethed, as though a living creature desperately trying to avoid the pale light of the coming dawn. Sunny slowly rose and, after some thought, carefully approached the edge of the stone platform.

Looking down, he blinked and then kneeled to make sure that what he saw wasn't an illusion.

The sea seemed to be receding.

Slowly at first, and then faster and faster, the water level was dropping. The circular stone formation he had been taking shelter on used to barely protrude out of the waves, but now there were meters and meters of wet rock between him and the restless surface of the sea.

As the sun climbed up, the monstrous ebb tide continued. Soon, Sunny found himself standing on the edge of a tall cliff, with a hundred-meter drop separating him from the churning waters. Beneath him, the rock formation broadened and changed shape. However, from his vantage point, it was hard to determine what that shape was, exactly.

At that time, the dark surface of the water began to be punctured here and there by sharp crimson blades. As it dropped even further, it was as though a crimson forest was slowly rising from the black depths. The "trees" were made of something resembling coral, growing chaotically into each other and stretching toward the sky.

They were colossal in size, with irregular protrusions entwining and merging together, looking monumental and eerie in the black and red reality of the sunlit void. The labyrinth formed by this strange reef stretched as far as Sunny could see, broken here and there by protruding cliffs, sudden chasms, and distant natural features.

Half an hour later, utterly shocked, Sunny stared down and realized that the sea was completely gone. If not for the black seaweed left hanging on wet rocks and scarlet pillars of coral, he would even doubt if it was ever there.

His small circular island had turned into the peak of a strange, towering, irregularly shaped cliff. Looking down, he felt his head spinning.

By then, the night had already fully retreated, letting morning finally take its place.

'I'm not seeing things, am I?' Sunny thought, pinching himself.

What the Spell was that?

Despite the sudden disappearance of the dark sea and its hidden monsters, Sunny was in no rush to climb down from his circular stone platform. Firstly, he felt that if the sea was able to disappear, it was surely able to come back, perhaps at any moment.

Secondly, he did not know what dangers the coral labyrinth was hiding. Perhaps there was something even scarier than the owner of the giant tentacle down there.

But that did not mean that he wasn't going to explore.

Coming back to his spot in the middle of the platform, Sunny sat down and commanded his shadow to separate itself from his body. Then, taking control of it, he approached the edge of the platform and nimbly slid down.

Habitually moving from one shadow to another, he began the descent. At this moment, Sunny was glad that shadows had no weight and were not affected by gravity.

While the shadow was busy climbing down, Sunny yawned.

"Say, don't you think that you need a name?"

Although his shadow was already too far away to hear him, they still could communicate through their shared connection. Of course, the fact that it could did not mean that it would. The shadow was sort of taciturn, mostly because it didn't have vocal cords and was unable to speak.

Plus, its temper wasn't that great.

"How about... Shameless? No? What about... Shady? Also no? Hm, what about something simpler, like... What? Well, do you have suggestions then? Alright, alright! We'll shelve this conversation for later."

By the time he was done with this short monologue, the shadow had already reached the bottom of the cliff. The range of [Shadow Control] was not limitless, but it was just barely enough to explore their nearest surroundings.

Entering the labyrinth, Sunny found it to be extremely disorienting and convoluted. The paths between coral pillars were sometimes broad, sometimes narrow. They twisted and turned without any logic, often leading to dead ends or even back to where he started. More than that, some paths entered inside the "coral" mounds, turning into dark tunnels.

The labyrinth was vast and multi-layered, making Sunny's head hurt after multiple fruitless attempts to memorize the layout of the nearest pathways. In the end, he sent the shadow up, forcing it to climb on top of the crimson forest and start jumping from one sharp coral blade to another — knowing full well that he himself would not be able to do the same.

Soon, he circled the strange cliff and froze, scared by the sight of what was happening in its shadow.

There, the corpse of the giant shark-like creature that had briefly pursued him the previous night was laying on the ground, the pillars of coral around it shattered and broken.

More precisely, half of it was there, with grotesque innards spilling out of the terrible wound and stretching far away into the distance. The other half was gone, as though it had never existed.

Around the corpse, hundreds of smaller monsters were scurrying, tearing away and devouring its flesh bit by bit. Each of them was about two and a half meters tall, looking like a weird mix of a demonic crab, a centaur, and a nightmare.

They had four pairs of long, segmented legs that ended in scythe-like protrusions. At the front, a human-like torso was protruding from the carapace, also clad in thick chitinous armor. The head, if it was even the appropriate word, was situated directly on top of the torso, with no neck in between. It had two narrow eye slits and a viscous-looking mouth with several slimy mandibles. Instead of hands, the monsters had two enormous pincers.

Currently, they were all using those pincers to tear off chunks of meat off the desiccated corpse and stuff them into their mouths. From time to time, a fight for an especially juicy piece of meat would break out, ending up in a few monsters being torn apart and quickly devoured by the victors.

Sunny swallowed.

Both because the sight of heavily armored, powerful monsters made him nervous and because looking at them feasting, he suddenly felt very hungry.

'Each of them seems like trouble. And there are hundreds of them.'

His luck, like always, was awful.

'At least I don't have to wonder why the labyrinth feels so empty. All the inhabitants are having a party!'

Feeling a little bit comprehensive about turning his shadow's back to the monsters, Sunny commanded it to look back and study the cliff he was taking shelter atop of. Something about it was making him feel uneasy.

The shadow turned around and looked up, taking in the sight of the strangely shaped cliff. It took Sunny a few minutes to shift his perspective and recognize it for what it was.

'That's... a finger. That's a hand. That is... a sword?'

He blinked.

'It's a statue.'

Indeed, the cliff was man-made. It was an ancient, colossal statue at least two hundred meters tall. The scale of it was so massive that it boggled the mind. From what Sunny could see, it depicted a knight clad in an elaborate plate armor, with seven shining stars carved into his breastplate. In his hands, he was holding a gargantuan sword, pointing it to the ground.

However, the most striking thing about it was that the giant stone knight was missing his head. In fact, the roughly circular platform Sunny was standing on turned out to be the top of his neck. And by the looks of it, the head wasn't missing by design — it was as though something, or someone, had violently tore it off at some point in the distant past.

Sunny walked around the platform, looking down from all sides, but didn't notice the head lying anywhere near.

'What on Earth is this place?'

Without any hints to find the answer, he led his shadow back to the giant's neck and settled at the western edge of it, studying the feasting monsters.

He didn't move until the sun was about to set.

Just as Sunny expected, as soon as the sun touched the horizon, a deafening rumble could be heard coming from somewhere below. The monsters instantly stopped their feast and scurried away, some hiding inside the coral pillars, some simply burying themselves in the soft soil.

A few minutes later, the first streams of black water appeared in the labyrinth. Their volume quickly grew, and soon an apocalyptic flood devoured everything around. The sea was returning with the approach of the night.

Sunny stared at this unimaginable process, thoughts churning in his head.

In an hour, the circular platform was the only thing above the dark waters once again.

Chapter 32: Making A Choice

With an empty stomach and a head full of thoughts, Sunny returned to the center of the platform and sat down. After a while, he beckoned to his shadow and said:

"Wake me up if anything happens."

Then, he closed his eyes and tried to fall asleep. His consciousness quickly slid into the sweet embrace of darkness, giving Sunny some well-needed rest.

In the middle of the night, however, a sudden impulse stirred him awake. Sunny jumped to his feet, his groggy mind full of tense apprehension. He was afraid that the owner of the giant tentacle had come back to finish the job.

Or maybe some other horror from the depths had sensed him and decided to snack on human meat.

However, the sea was quiet and calm. He didn't hear any abnormalities around the knight's statue.

"What is it?" Sunny whispered, addressing the shadow.

The shadow silently pointed him in a particular direction.

Turning his head, Sunny squinted. He quickly understood why it was a good idea to wake up. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to see...

Out there in the distance, a few kilometers away, a small orange light was shimmering in the darkness. Its reflections were rising and falling with the movement of waves.

It was too far away to make out any details, so Sunny just stared at it for a while. Pretty soon, the light disappeared.

"Other Sleepers? Natural phenomenon? Or some monster laying a trap?"

Memories of nightmarish deepwater creatures immediately came to his mind.

Shaking his head, Sunny lay back down and attempted to return to his slumber. However, this time sleep was escaping him. Pangs of hunger were still not unbearable, but slowly becoming more and more intense. The thirst, however, was worse.

In the end, he remained awake up until the sun rose again, sending the dark sea in retreat.

As soon as the morning came, the pincer monsters crawled back from their hiding spots and rushed to the giant carcass to continue their feast.

Sunny watched them for some time and then walked to the opposite side of the platform to take a look in the direction where he had seen the mysterious light the previous night.

At a considerable distance from the headless statue, five or six kilometers away, the ground rose naturally and formed something akin to a hill. On top of that hill, an especially massive coral pillar rose to the sky.

From the looks of it, its upper branches were just high enough to stay above water in the night.

Various ideas stormed into Sunny's head, but at the end of it, only two questions were really important.

First of all — would he be able to find the way through the labyrinth and cover that distance during the day? And more importantly, should he even attempt to do it? After all, there was no indication that the source of the mysterious light was something beneficial, as opposed to dreadful and deadly.

Not having enough information to make a choice, Sunny settled back to study the monsters. He did, however, send the shadow to investigate as far into the labyrinth as the range of Shadow Control allowed, hoping to chart at least the beginning of the path that could potentially lead him to that hill.

Logically speaking, he was as safe atop the headless statue as he probably could be in this strange place. The only problem was, he was going to die soon because of thirst or hunger.

Both problems were solvable if he were to venture down. He could desalinate the seawater in a number of ways taught to him by Teacher Julius, with materials that were present pretty much everywhere in the Dream Realm. He could also prepare traps and hunt a pincer monster to eat. With their massive size, just one of them would be enough to feed him for weeks.

He could easily see such a routine: hunting by day, returning to the statue at the approach of the night. It was probably his safest choice.

However, this way of doing things lacked one vital element: the potential for improvement. It was well suited for keeping Sunny alive, but had no way of giving him hope. If he was destined to spend the rest of his life in the small area surrounding the headless statue, devouring monsters and trembling at night in fear of being devoured by something bigger in turn...

Well, he would rather just jump down and end it right now.

That pretty much meant that the only choice left for him was to try and reach the source of the orange light. And if Sunny was really trying to attempt it, he had to do it before the pincer monsters were done consuming the giant carcass.

That way, at least, the surrounding segment of the labyrinth was going to be free of them.

Firm in his choice, Sunny decided to leave the headless statue the next morning. He would spend the rest of today exploring paths through the labyrinth and preparing himself mentally.

With that, he closed his eyes and concentrated his perception on the moving shadow.

In the night, a sudden storm descended upon the dark sea. Sunny was stirred awake by the shadow in time to prepare himself for the crushing winds and the pelting rain.

Usually, rain always put him in a bad mood. But this time he was too thirsty to think about anything except for freshwater. Staying low so as to not be blown over the edge of the platform, Sunny cupped his hands and waited until they became filled with rainwater. Then he raised them to his mouth and greedily drank.

Strikes of lightning illuminated everything above the churning sea. If anyone were to see Sunny now, they would have noticed a wide grin on his face.

The storm continued to rampage for several hours. Sunny crouched in the middle of the platform, enduring its rage. More than once, a tall wave would crash into the headless knight's neck, threatening to wash him away. But Sunny held tight to the deep grooves in the stone surface of the platform, sticking to it like glue.

By morning, when the storm finally dissipated, all of his muscles were sore.

But there was no time to waste.

As soon as the monsters came back to the carcass, with a few stragglers quickly following behind, he slid over the edge of the platform and began to nimbly climb down.

Sunny had to thank Wilderness Survival classes once again, since he had been taught the basics of rock climbing as well. Teacher Julius was adamant about giving his student a crash course in all possible forms of traversal. Additionally, Sunny had already scouted the optimal way down and

memorized the best holds and indentions to grab onto with the help of his shadow.

Soon, his feet finally touched the ground.

Despite the fact that leaving the safety of the headless statue was going to put him in considerable danger, Sunny instantly felt his mood improving. Remaining passive for the last couple of days did not suit his character well. Now, even if his plan were to end in failure, at least he was going to go down doing something that he had decided to do.

Trying and failing was better than not trying at all.

The black mud was deep enough to slow him down, but not to the extent he had been afraid of. With some practice, Sunny was soon able to walk at an acceptable speed. What's more, as long as he stuck to the shadows, his steps were light and silent, producing no squelching noises from the mud.

He headed for one of the paths that were supposed to lead him to the distant hill and entered the cool shade of the crimson labyrinth.

Immediately, a strange feeling enveloped his mind. It was as though the world beyond the labyrinth did not exist anymore, and all that was left were its twisting, dark paths.

'This thing almost seems endless.'

Shaking his head, Sunny sent the shadow to scout ahead, hoping to be notified of any latent danger in advance, and began to move forward. His life now depended on whether or not he would reach the distant hill before the sun began to set.

He didn't even want to think about what would happen if he were still inside the labyrinth once the dark sea came back in an unstoppable flood.

The shadow moved ahead of him, not meeting any hurdles. Sometimes it would climb high to scout the direction of different paths, allowing Sunny to choose the optimal route most of the time. However, he still had to

backtrack a considerable distance once or twice, ending up either in a dead-end or on a path leading in the wrong direction.

Despite that, everything seemed to be going smoothly.

Sunny even had time to carefully study the interior of the labyrinth, noticing more details of its composition, as well as a frightening amount of unrecognizable bones hiding in the mud beneath his feet.

Because of how well things were going, he lowered his guard a little. His arrogance was also to blame — with his extensive preparations and skillful control of the Shadow Scout, Sunny subconsciously patted himself on the shoulder and assumed that everything was going to be fine.

That's why, when the mud directly in front of him started to move, he was a fraction of a second late to react.

In the next moment, a massive pincer shot out of the ground and tore through the air, threatening to cut his body in half with one crushing strike.

Chapter 33: Carapace Scavenger | Shadow Slave

'Crap!'

This was the only thought in Sunny's head as he awkwardly fell backward, allowing the pincer to close right in front of his face with a loud "clack". The jagged, chitinous blades were so close that he could clearly see bits of mud sticking to their surface.

Sunny landed on his back, narrowly avoiding the unexpected strike. The good thing was that he managed to avoid being injured or even killed. The bad thing was that he was sprawled on the ground, unable to quickly create distance between him and the attacker. The massive pincer was still hovering above.

Just as this realization dawned on Sunny, he desperately rolled to the side. In the next moment, the pincer lunged down, sending small tremors through the mud. If not for his quick reaction, Sunny's chest would have been caved in by that blow.

He was just beginning to stand up when the pincer swiped sideways. Luckily, Sunny was ready: instead of trying to dodge or block the attack, he went with it, letting the pincer collide with his outstretched hands and cushioning the blow.

As his arms screamed in pain, Sunny used the force of the blow and allowed his body to be sent flying through the air. This way, at least, he would get out of the pincer's range.

He might not have been taught how to fight, but one thing he knew very well was how to fall!

Instead of breaking his neck or having the breath beaten out of him by the landing, he braced his body and nimbly rolled before stopping some distance away from the ambushing monster.

'I take it back!' Sunny thought, remembering his sarcastic critique of Hero's battle rolls. 'Rolling is an integral part of any respectable monster-fighting technique!'

Then, he looked up, trying to ascertain the situation.

In front of him, the attacker had finally shown itself. It burrowed from under the mud, casting a vast shadow over kneeling Sunny. Its tiny eyes were full of rage, hunger, and malice.

It was one of the pincer monsters he had spent so much time observing. Towering over him at almost three meters in height, the bulky creature moved its mandibles and produced a jarring, piercing screech.

'Why aren't you devouring the giant carcass with the rest of your buddies, you crab bastard?!'

However, the answer to Sunny's indignant plea was rather obvious. The monster seemed to be in a rather bad shape: half of its eight scythe-like legs were broken, and there were cracks in its thick carapace, each oozing with viscous azure blood. Additionally, he was missing one of its two pincer arms, which seemed to have been torn off entirely at the shoulder.

If not for this pathetic state, the creature would have had no need to hide in the mud, hoping to catch easy prey. It could have just followed the other monsters and joined on the feast. Sunny was just unlucky to stumble directly upon its ambush.

He had relied too much on the scouting abilities of his shadow, forgetting that it wasn't much more observant than an awakened human. It was also weightless and inaudible — that's why the monster did not react when the shadow had passed over its trap a minute earlier.

On the other hand, Sunny could also consider himself lucky — by the same logic, he would not have been able to dodge the creature's sudden attack if not for its crippled, slowed state.

But pondering on his luck could wait for later — right now, Sunny had a far more pressing thing to do. Namely, try to survive.

'Get back here!' he ordered the shadow and jumped to the side.

In the next second, the space he occupied a moment before was torn apart by the attacking monster. Its heavy pincer crashed into the side of a coral pillar, sending crimson shards flying in every direction.

Sunny caught his balance and continued moving. He was hoping that the bulky, heavily armored, wounded creature would not be able to match his speed, but unfortunately, it turned out to be surprisingly agile. Its scythe-like legs pierced the mud behind him, and the pincer was already flying through the air again, threatening to decapitate the young man at any second.

Sunny ducked, dodging the pincer, and finally caught a second of reprieve. His eyes darted around, desperately searching for something to use as a weapon. Almost instantly, he noticed a long, smooth, sharp bone left behind by some unknown creature sticking from the mud. Without slowing down, he bent down and grabbed the bone, pulling it out with one forceful tug.

The bone was almost one and a half meters long, ending in a narrow, sharp tip. It was almost like a spear. The problem was, even with the added length of this makeshift spear, Sunny's range of attack was still shorter than the monster's. He also doubted that it was capable of piercing the hard carapace.

In short, he had to get close and aim for one of the cracks in the creature's armor. However, he didn't dare to. At that short of a distance, the monster could easily crush him into a paste by using just its weight and hulking frame.

A crazy idea entered Sunny's mind.

A bit shocked, he momentarily couldn't decide whether it was the product of audacity or foolishness. Either way, he wasn't insane enough to actually consider it.

At that moment, the pincer lashed out again. This time, Sunny was a little late to evade, and as a result, a sharp pain pierced his left leg. It was grazed by the edge of the pincer. The Puppeteer's Shroud held, not allowing the monster to draw blood, but the force of the impact was enough to throw Sunny tumbling to the ground.

There was no time to recover.

As his eyes opened wide, Sunny understood that it was time to act crazy. So, instead of trying to dodge, he stopped moving and allowed the monster to grab him across his torso with the pincer.

Immediately, a terrible pressure descended on his ribs. Sunny felt as though he was going to be split apart, but his armor, received from defeating an awakened tyrant, resisted the crushing bite of the monster's pincer. Every muscle in his body tensed, delaying the moment when his insides would be turned into mush.

In the next second, Sunny's shadow fell from above, wrapping itself around the Puppeteer's Shroud. With the protective properties of the armor enhanced, he was able to better resist the pincer's pulverizing embrace.

Sunny and the monster appeared to be at an impasse. The young man couldn't free himself from the monster's grip, while the monster could not kill the prey by cutting it in halves with its pincer.

They stared at each other. Then, an insane fire ignited in the creature's eyes. It clicked its mandibles and raised Sunny in the air, bringing him closer to its mouth, obviously intent on biting his head off.

'Why is everyone trying to eat me?! Am I that tasty?'

Sunny didn't struggle as the monster brought him close to its mandibles. He knew he only had one chance to live.

In the last moment, Sunny allowed the shadow to flow from Puppeteer's Shroud onto the sharp bone he was still clenching in his hand. Then, he

gathered all his strength, leaned forward and thrust the bone forward with as much power as he could.

Guided by his hand, the dark bone spear shot forward and pierced through the creature's tiny eye, sinking in deep. The other eye of the monster narrowed.

Gritting his teeth from the unbearable pain in his ribs, Sunny twisted the bone, trying to do as much damage to the creature's brain as possible.

For a couple of seconds, nothing happened. Then, he felt the pressure on his body diminishing.

The pincer opened, letting Sunny fall down. As he hit the ground, the hulking monster crashed to the ground, too. The bone spear was still sticking from its head, bathed in the streams of azure liquid.

Sunny moaned and drew in a raspy, painful breath.

[You have slain an awakened beast, Carapace Scavenger.]

[You have received a Memory: Azure Blade.]

[... Your shadow grows stronger.]

Chapter 34: Only Steel Remembers

Sunny was sprawled in the mud, trying to catch his breath. The subtle voice of the Spell echoed in his ears.

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Immediately, he felt a slight change. His body grew a little bit stronger, his vision a little sharper, his skin a little smoother. The change was minimal, but apparent.

'What was that?'

He had a guess, and it was easy to confirm. Sunny summoned the runes.

[Shadow Fragments: 14/1000].

Previously, he only had twelve of the mysterious shadow fragments, with no knowledge on how to acquire more. Now it seemed that the process was automatic: he only had to kill an enemy to absorb a part of their shadow and enhance his own core.

More than that, the number of fragments he was able to receive wasn't directly correlated to the number of slain enemies. After a bit of thinking, Sunny came to a preliminary conclusion: dormant soul cores gave him one fragment, while awakened ones gave two. However, only enemies he defeated directly — more or less — counted.

Killing the Mountain King's Larva, a dormant beast, had given him one shadow fragment. Finishing off the veteran slaver, a dormant human — another. Mountain King itself was an awakened tyrant, which meant that it had five awakened cores. With each giving Sunny two shadow fragments, he ended up with a total of twelve. And now, after killing the Carapace Scavenger, he had fourteen.

Interestingly, he didn't receive any fragments from the deaths of Shifty, Scholar and Hero, even though they perished as a result of his

machinations. It seems he had to finish an enemy off with his own two hands to absorb a part of their shadow.

Well, or at least by summoning an ancient dead god.

The process was quite similar to how normal Awakened increased their power, with the only difference being that the steps of extracting and consuming the corresponding material, soul shards, were skipped in favor of instant absorption. That meant that shadow fragments could not be stored, and subsequently could not be bought or traded.

He won't have an opportunity to receive them as a reward for completing missions, providing services or selling various spoils. If Sunny wanted to grow stronger, his only option was to fight and kill.

'No peaceful life for me, I guess.'

Previously, Sunny thought that he at least had the choice to choose a relatively safe path. Many Awakened never left the confines of human Citadels and never faced Nightmare Creatures, choosing instead to perform various jobs in the Dream Realm just as they would in the real world.

They received payments in the form of soul shards, which were simultaneously the fuel of one's progression and the universal currency inside the Citadels. Sunny was never set on pursuing such a life, but not even having a choice was sort of irritating.

Luckily, there was a bright side, too. Without the need to use soul shards to strengthen his core, he would be able to spend everything he earns freely and without concern. After all, after he kills an enemy and absorbs the shadow fragments, the soul shard would still be there, ready to be collected and exchanged for something Sunny might need in the future.

That would effectively make him twice as efficient in terms of earning and spending, which was not a small advantage.

Additionally, there was the matter of the Shadow Core...

Since both Sunny and his shadow were tied to it, strengthening the core would not only increase Sunny's power, but also enhance the shadow. So, if he were to use it to further empower himself, the actual effect would be stacked, producing a twofold enhancement. So, for each shadow fragment he collected, Sunny would actually be able to rip twice as much benefit as an Awakened would from a soul shard.

'Not bad. Not bad at all!'

Ah, the future was bright. Provided he survives and gets the opportunity to even have a future, of course.

Sitting up, Sunny moved his eyes and found the cluster of runes describing his Memories. Azure Blade... had he finally gotten a weapon?

Memory: [Azure Blade].

Memory Rank: Awakened.

Memory Type: Weapon.

Memory Description: [On this forgotten shore, only steel remembers.]

'Huh. Interesting.'

Not very informative, but interesting.

Sunny summoned his new weapon, and a sharp, light sword immediately appeared in his hand. It was about a meter long, including the handle. The blade was straight and single-edged, ending in an angular tip. It was forged out of azure steel, with a beautiful layered pattern. Deep inside the steel, white sparks could be seen. The crossguard was minimalistic and simple, offering almost no protection to the wielder's hands.

If Sunny knew his way around cold weapons, he would have called it a tang dao. However, he had no idea about such things: all he could gather was that the blade was single-edged, which meant that it was probably meant for slashing and cutting as opposed to piercing, and that the handle was long enough to accommodate two hands.

Also, the sword was pretty.

He summoned the shadow and made it wrap itself around the Azure Blade. Immediately, the steel became bluish-black, with a scattering of white sparks. It looked like a starlit night sky.

Sunny stood up and waved the sword a couple of times, getting accustomed to its weight. The sharp edge whistled as it cut the air.

'Well, now I finally look like a real Awakened.'

After that, he cast a gaze at the corpse of the carapace scavenger and grimaced. Eh, this part was not going to be pleasant.

After some time, he managed to break open the cracked carapace and cut away a few strips of tender, pink meat. He also did not forget to extract the radiant crystal from the beast's chest — the soul shard.

Without much hope, he tried to absorb the shard, remembering how it was supposed to be done — just as he expected, nothing happened.

'They're really of no direct use to me.'

With a shrug, Sunny places the shard and the meat in a makeshift rucksack he weaved from black seaweed and looked at the sun.

The day was still young. He still had a good chance of making it to the distant hill before the sea came back. However, his left leg was banged up in the fight with the scavenger beast, so walking wasn't as easy as it was before. He gritted his teeth and began limping.

Hours passed. Due to his bruises and increased vigilance, Sunny's progress slowed down considerably. He was sweating and grinding his teeth, feeling pain with each step. What's worse, the further he reached into the labyrinth, the more confusing and entangled the paths became. Even with the shadow's help, he constantly had to backtrack and struggled to move in the right direction.

'Crap, crap, crap...'

If nothing changed, Sunny would not reach his goal. Which meant that he'll be crushed to death by the returning sea.

Not allowing himself to think about dying, Sunny tried to walk faster. However, he couldn't be too hasty: making a wrong turn would have taken precious minutes away from him, so he had to choose the way carefully. Additionally, missing to notice another ambush could end his life directly.

'Curses!'

Just when he was beginning to feel desperate, his shadow suddenly saw something that momentarily sent Sunny into a stupor.

Some distance further down the path, beyond a few turns, the corals widened, creating a small clearing. And in the middle of that clearing, someone was walking across the mud.

The first thing Sunny saw was fair skin... a lot of skin. The tall, lithe girl was only dressed in a makeshift skirt and a crude brassiere, both made out of seaweed. However, it didn't seem to bother her. With a calm expression, she stopped and looked back. The wind was playing with her short silver hair.

It was Nephis, the Changing Star.

In one hand, she was holding the end of a strange golden rope.

And on the other end of the rope, Cassia, the blind girl, was carefully following behind.

Chapter 35: A Shadow, A Star And An Oracle

Grey sky above, black mud below, an endless sea of crimson in between. On this dreamlike backdrop, two beautiful girls were walking across the labyrinth.

One was delicate and fragile, with blond hair and cerulean, aimless eyes. She was dressed in a simple tunic, with leather sandals on her feet and a cloak the color of sea waves draped around her shoulders.

The other was tall and lithe. She had silky silver hair and clear, grey eyes. Her revealing clothes were crudely made out of black seaweed, leaving her fair skin and athletic build exposed. She was poised, alert, and barefoot.

A golden rope connected two girls together.

'Wow. What a sight...' Sunny thought.

He suddenly regretted that he was not an artist. The picture just begged to be made into a painting.

'Wait... why am I thinking about that? People! I found people!'

His heart skipped a bit. If Nephis and Cassia were here, then the orange light from before, most likely, had something to do with them. Which meant that they knew how to get to the tall hill.

Which meant that Sunny didn't have to be crushed to death by the high tide!

'Uh... so what do I do now?'

He wasn't the best at ingratiating himself to other people. In fact, he was the polar opposite — people usually instinctively avoided him. And that was in normal circumstances. This time, however, he had spent a whole of four weeks making sure that everyone in the Academy hated his guts...

'Good job, Sunny!'

Still, he was at least useful. In this situation, an additional body was already a great boon when facing hungry monsters. And he wasn't just anyone: his ability to scout ahead alone was worth a lot. Surely they'll understand that... right?

With a heavy sigh, Sunny stepped into shadows and hurried to the clearing. He reached it in a minute or so, hiding and observing the two girls before making a final decision.

Helping herself with the wooden staff, blind Cassia slowly approached the middle of the clearing and extended her hand, finding Nephis and touching her on the shoulder.

"Why did you stop?"

Nephis supported the blind girl and glanced at the sky.

"It's getting late."

An awkward pause hung between two girls. After some time, Cassia asked:

"So you think we should turn back?"

Nephis blinked and cleared her throat.

"Yes."

Sunny was a bit amused by their exchange.

'What is she, a strong silent type?'

Then he returned to his dilemma and grimaced.

'How do I approach them? Damn, why is this so hard! It's not like I'm trying to ask them out on a date. I mean, one of them... both of them? What am I thinking about?! Just go and say hi!'

But then, if he suddenly appeared out of the shadows... not at all like a creep... how high was the probability of them getting spooked and

attacking him before noticing that he was not a monster?

Wait, why would they... argh, to hell with this!

Deciding on the safest approach, Sunny commanded his shadow to abandon its hiding place and move to a spot where Nephis could clearly see it. He could clearly sense the shadow rolling its eyes as it obeyed the order.

As soon as the shadow started to move, Nephis suddenly snapped her hand sideways. Immediately, a long sword appeared in it, cutting the air as it assumed a defensive position. Before the shadow could even take two steps out of its hiding spot, it was already pierced by Changing Star's grey eyes.

The shadow froze. It seemed a bit startled.

Cassia took a step back.

"Neph? What is it?"

Nephis didn't answer immediately, carefully observing the shadow. Then she simply said:

"There's a shadow."

Cassia's doll-like face paled.

"A shadow? Scavengers?"

The tall girl tilted her head a little.

"No. It's a human shadow."

This was clearly not what Cassia expected to hear. With an expression of surprise, she asked:

"A human shadow? What... what is it doing?"

Nephis hesitated. After a while, she answered in a flat tone:

"...It's waving at us."

After a whole minute of silence, Cassia finally found the words to react.

"What?"

"I said: it's waving..."

"Yes, I know! I mean... why is it doing that?"

Nephis opened her mouth, then closed it again.

"I don't know. Maybe it's a distraction to lure us into a trap."

At this point, Sunny decided that it was time to talk. He inhaled deeply, then said in a friendly tone:

"Actually, I just sent it ahead to make sure that you don't stab me with that sword before realizing that I'm human."

Immediately, Nephis turned her head, pinpointing the exact location where Sunny was hiding in a blotch of shadows. Her sword slightly shifted, aiming at the new threat.

"If you're human, why are hiding in the shadows like a creep?"

'Goddamit! I'm not a creep!'

Sunny choked. But his Flaw was merciless: he had to provide an answer, and a truthful one at that.

"I mean, you're Changing Star Nephis. To be honest, I'm a little afraid."

Nephis did not answer. Because of her hard-to-read face, it was almost impossible to determine whether she believed him or not. However, he included her True Name in his answer for a reason: if he was some monster pretending to be human, he wouldn't have known it.

Luckily, Cassia was more expressive.

"Are you the boy who sat with me in the cafeteria?"

Sunny smiled. Meanwhile, Nephis glanced at the blind girl.

"Do you know him?"

Cassia nodded.

"I recognize his voice. His name is Sunless. He was in second-to-last place in the rankings, right above me."

The tall girl frowned, as if trying to remember. Then she asked:

"The pervert?"

The smile disappeared from Sunny's face, replaced by exasperation.

'Oh, come on!'

Cassia hesitated and didn't answer.

"Hey! I'm not really a pervert, you know! I just... uhm... said a few things. To a few girls. It was all a misunderstanding."

Nephis was silent for a few seconds, and then, finally, dismissed her sword.

"Okay. You can come out."

Sunny limped out of the shadows, summoning his own back. It flowed to his feet and reattached itself, visibly shaking. The bastard was laughing at him...

Stopping a few meters away from Nephis, he raised his hands, showing that he didn't mean the girls any harm. Changing Star gave him an inquisitive look.

"What happened to you?"

She was referring to his limp, bruises, and overall banged-up look. Sunny sighed.

"Carapace Scavenger."

Nephis raised an eyebrow:

"You managed to get away alive?"

'You bet I did!'

Sunny subconsciously straightened his back.

"I didn't get away. I killed it."

To prove his point, he gestured at his rucksack, full of delicious monster meat. Nephis looked him over again, reevaluating her opinion of him. Now, there were hints of approval in her eyes

Carapace Scavengers were only beasts, but they were still awakened. With the addition of their mighty physique and natural armor, defeating one was not an easy feat for any Sleeper, who all had a dormant core. Let alone someone from the very bottom of the ranking list.

Come to think of it, it was even a bit too outstanding.

Sunny lowered his eyes.

"Eh... it was already wounded."

Nephis shrugged.

"A kill is a kill. You did well."

After that, she fell silent, as though not planning to say anything else. Sunny also wasn't sure what to say. Luckily, Cassia came to the rescue.

"Are you seriously injured?"

He shook his head.

"No, it's just that my ribs and leg are bruised — I'll be fine in a day or two. My armor is pretty resilient."

He wasn't worried that they might be tempted to kill him to get the Puppeteer's Shroud. That was because Memories were destroyed at the moment of their owner's death. So they only could be transferred voluntarily by a living person.

Well, there was always torture and blackmail. But he doubted that any one of the two beautiful girls would stoop to that.

Sunny cleared his throat.

"Before stumbling on the Scavenger, I was heading for the tall hill with the massive coral pillar on top. But after the fight, my speed decreased. Now I'm worried about not making it in time. Do you perhaps know the way?"

Cassia smiled.

"Actually, we spend the last days on that hill. We were just about to go back."

Nephis didn't say anything, looking at the sky.

Sunny licked his lips.

"Well... can I come with you?"

'They're not going to say "no"... right?'

The blind girl turned her head to her companion, a clear question written on her face.

"Neph?"

Nephis lowered her eyes, staring at Sunny. After a while, she said:

"No..."

'What?!'

"...problem."

No problem.

'What's wrong with you, princess?! Can't you speak faster?!'

Feeling his heart beating wildly in his chest, Sunny smiled.

"Well. Alright..."

Chapter 36: Bonfire | Shadow Slave

The rest of the way to the tall hill did not take a lot of time. With Nephis leading the way, taking all the right turns at all the right places, there was no need to explore the labyrinth and backtrack after encountering a dead end. Additionally, there were no scavengers around.

In fact, they could have moved ever quicker if not for Cassia, who walked slowly even with the help of her staff. Guided by the golden rope, she carefully explored the ground ahead before taking each step. The uneven paths of the crimson forest were not an ideal surface for a blind person to walk on.

Sunny didn't say much, periodically casting an incredulous glance at the strange pair. No matter how he looked at it, Cassia seemed to be dead weight. Perhaps it was cruel to say, but in the merciless reality of the Dream Realm, misguided kindness was a sure way to end up dead.

Before meeting and observing the girls, he still had hope that Cassia's terrible Flaw hid an unexpected and powerful Aspect. But from what he saw, it wasn't the case. If she couldn't even walk properly, what kind of power was there to hide? Nothing could outweigh the ruthless fact that the blind girl couldn't protect herself, and thus would only drag her companions down.

One had to be a fool or not fond of living to allow that to happen. So... which one of these descriptions suited Nephis? Somehow, he felt that neither did.

The sunset was not far off when they reached the hill. After climbing it and approaching the massive growth of coral, Nephis dismissed the golden rope and immediately summoned it again. This way, it was untied and appeared in her hands in a neat bundle.

'Ah. So it's a Memory.'

Sunny wondered what qualities the magical rope had. Soon, his curiosity was satisfied: right in front of his surprised eyes, the length of the rope suddenly began to increase. Soon, it was thrice as long as it was before.

Nephis calmly tied both ends of the rope into loops and then threw one of them into the air, accurately coiling it around a prominent protrusion near the top of the coral pillar. Then, she tested if the rope would hold, swiftly climbed up and waved from above, giving Sunny the signal to follow.

After hesitating for a second, Sunny approached the rope and grabbed it.

He couldn't help thinking that this would be the perfect opportunity to cut his head off. With him helpless while climbing and Nephis standing on the top of the pillar... yeah. The vivid picture appeared in his mind.

'Stop being paranoid!' Sunny thought, trying to calm himself down.

It's not that he was sure of Changing Star's impeccable moral qualities. Instead, he was certain of one thing: if Nephis really wanted to kill him, she wouldn't have needed to wait for an opportunity. She could have just cut him into ribbons whenever.

Simultaneously scared and reassured by this thought, Sunny nimbly climbed up and joined Nephis at the top of the coral mound. He then turned around and watched curiously, wondering how Cassia was going to get to them.

The blind girl dismissed the wooden staff and approached the rope. Then she caught it in a hand, traced it down to the loop at the end, and placed her foot inside. As soon as she was done, Nephis grabbed the rope and started pulling, lifting Cassia little by little until she had reached the top. She only had to grab Nephis's hand and make a step to join them.

'Huh. Efficient.'

The coral mound was much larger than the circular stone platform of the giant knight's neck. In fact, it was almost like a small island. At the highest point of the island, hidden behind some coral blades, the girls had made a

little camp. There were piles of seaweed to sleep on, strips of scavenger meat drying under the sun, and a firepit.

Sunny pointed to the makeshift firepit.

"Was it you two nights ago? I've seen an orange light in the distance."

Cassia's face darkened.

"Yes, this was the first time we made a fire. But it turned out to be a really bad mistake."

Nephis sighed.

Sunny raised an eyebrow, surprised.

"Why?"

The blind girl touched her hair and turned her head to Nephis.

"At night, any light will attract monsters. We were attacked by scavengers first. And then... then..."

She paled and didn't finish. But she didn't have to: the memory of the colossal tentacle was still fresh in Sunny's mind.

It seemed that he was lucky to meet these two when he had. If not, he was certainly going to make a fire tonight to roast some scavenger meat.

"Uh. I see."

Nephis looked at the sky and cleared her throat.

"It should be fine now. We still have time before the sun sets."

After that, she got busy making the fire. Cassia simply sat on a pile of seaweed and waited. Not knowing what to do, Sunny lowered himself to the ground and let his tired, bruised body rest.

After a while, he said:

"I have fresh meat in my rucksack. Do you have water?"

Cassia smiled.

"Yes!"

After that, she extended an arm to him. A second later, a beautiful bottle made of patterned blue glass appeared in her hand.

"That's a Memory I have. It's always full."

Sunny took the glass bottle and looked at it with envy.

'An endless supply of water, huh? Sure beats my super loud bell!'

"Thank you."

He brought the bottle to his lips and greedily drank the cool, delicious water. Indeed, no matter how much he drank, the amount of water inside did not seem to decrease.

"Is it really endless?"

Cassia touched her hair again.

"Uh... not really. If you turn it upside down and let the water flow, it will stop in half an hour or so. But then it will be full again pretty soon."

At that time, Nephis was already done making the fire. Without looking up, she took Sunny's rucksack and opened it. Immediately, the soul shard rolled out. The tall girl looked at it, then at Sunny. Then she put the shard back in and pulled out the meat.

Sunny became tense, preparing a misleading answer. But Nephis did not ask. So, he pretended like nothing had happened and continued his conversation with Cassia.

"It's still a great Memory. Getting drinkable water is not an easy task!"

Cassia nodded and smiled, pleased by his words.

Soon, the rich smell of roasting meat permeated the air. At the same time, the sun was beginning to approach the horizon; a loud rumble came from somewhere beneath, and first traces of the black water began to appear between crimson walls of the labyrinth.

Sunny looked east, where the skies were already growing dark. Then he uncomfortably shifted.

"Do scavengers come all the way up here?"

Nephis turned the meat and nodded.

"Yes. But... only at night. In the day, most of them seem to disappear."

Sunny grinned, having an idea of why there weren't a lot of monsters in the labyrinth in the day.

"That's because they all gather near the place I had been spending my time recently. You should have seen it — the tall cliff to the west of here. Well, it's actually a statue."

Cassia opened her eyes wide.

"A... a statue? But for you to survive, it should be..."

"Yes, it's a giant statue of a knight, at least two hundred meters tall. He is missing his head, so I hid on top of the neck. Anyway... the day we were sent here, two sea creatures fought each other near that statue. When the water receded, I saw an enormous carcass lying there, with hundreds of scavengers slowly tearing it apart."

Nephis nodded.

"That would explain the lack of Nightmare Creature in the day. How long?"

Sunny blinked.

"How long what?"

Changing Star stared at him for a few seconds, making everyone feel uncomfortable.

"How long... until they are done devouring the carcass?"

"Oh. One day more, two at most."

Nephis turned away, took the meat away from the fire, and then quickly extinguished it.

'There's definitely something wrong with that girl!'

The three of them ate in the dimming light of the twilight. The meat was juicy, tender and indescribably delicious. It was better than anything Sunny had ever tasted, even back in the Academy's cafeteria. Of course, his excruciating hunger played a part in that.

From time to time, they would pass the glass bottle to each other.

When they were finished with their meal, the dark sea was back, and the night was upon them. Everything was consumed by absolute darkness.

Of course, Sunny could easily see both Nephis and Cassia. Under the cover of the night, Changing Star remained pretty much the same. The blind girl, however, allowed her true emotions to show, thinking that no one would see. She seemed much more lost, lonely and frightened than she did in the day.

As if trying to resist these feelings, Cassia said in a bright voice:

"How about we formally introduce ourselves? I'm Cassie."

Nephis glanced in her direction and shrugged.

"Neph."

Next, it was Sunny's turn. He exhaled, glad that they didn't ask his name directly. Most likely, he would still have been able to provide his human name — however, it also might have depended on the wording of the question.

Relieved, he smiled and answered:

"I'm Sunless. But you can call me Sunny."

Chapter 37: Getting To Know Each Other

Sunny was slowly growing fond of having conversations in the dark. Without the burden of light, people were more relaxed and honest. It reminded him of the frequent blackouts that used to sweep through the city when he was a little kid. His family had no choice but to huddle together and spend a few hours doing nothing but talking to each other.

Now, these dark hours had become some of his most precious memories.

He was silent for a few moments and then said:

"Since we're going to be depending on each other, should we share what abilities and Memories we have at our disposal?"

This was a logical suggestion. If they were going to fight side by side, knowing each other's strengths was more or less vital. Still, he noticed Nephis glancing in his direction with a guarded look on her face.

Luckily, he was obscured by darkness.

"I'll start," Sunny said, both to show his sincerity and to reveal information about himself in a controlled manner.

If he took the initiative to talk, he still had to tell the truth, but how much and to what extent was still for him to decide. If they were to ask and he had to answer, however... things would become unpredictable.

"My attributes give me an affinity to shadows. I also have a slight affiliation to divinity. Lastly, I am prone to finding myself in unlikely situations."

Cassie listened carefully, and then lowered her head, as though embarrassed.

"Uh... he is telling the truth. Not that we doubted your honesty!"

'Why not? I spent so much time earning the reputation of a pathological liar!'

Sunny cleared his throat and smiled, hiding his nervousness:

"Really? That's good to know. But... why are you so sure that I am being honest?"

The blind girl shifted a little.

"Oh! That's my Ability. I can "see" people's Attributes. Sometimes, I also receive, uh, "visions". They can be about the future or the past. I mean, that's what I think... it only happened a couple of times."

Sunny swallowed, but then relaxed.

'So, she is an oracle of sorts. Luckily, her insight is limited to Attributes... otherwise, I'd be in real trouble. Still, I'll have to be careful around her.'

He finally realized how the blind girl had known about his birthday. The question was whether she had seen it in a vision of the future or in a vision of the past. If it was the former, was it safe to assume that he would certainly be able to celebrate at least one more birthday?

Or did knowing the future actually affected and changed it? For example, after learning that he was definitely going to survive, Sunny might have naturally relaxed and lowered his guard. Then, he would die as the result of it. It surely seemed possible, right? That's assuming that the future could be changed. But maybe it wasn't? Then...

Feeling his head hurting, Sunny decided to avoid this line of thought for now. Instead, he hid his inner turmoil and said in a friendly tone:

"That's a good Ability. Speaking of Abilities: you have already seen mine. My shadow can move independently and explore. It can't affect the material world, but we share sight and hearing. That way, I can spot danger before encountering it. The shadow is fast and stealthy: it can go anywhere and is almost impossible to notice. Oh, I can also see in the dark."

He smiled, expecting the girls to understand and appreciate the utility of his Shadow Scout. Their reaction, however, was a bit strange: Nephis slowly turned her head in his direction, while Cassie became a bit pale and raised her hands to cover her chest.

"Uh... what?"

Nephis frowned and said in a flat tone:

"Have you ever used your Ability in the Academy?"

Sunny blinked.

'What a strange question!'

"In the Academy? Sure, of course. Why?"

Oh, right... they think that I'm a pervert...

Crap!

Before the girls could say anything, he hurriedly raised his hand and blurted:

"But I have never used it to do anything improper! You have to believe me!"

Fortunately, it was the honest truth. However, both Nephis and Cassie looked skeptical. Sunny gritted his teeth.

"I had more important things to do than... than whatever you're thinking about! I spent almost every waking hour learning how to survive!"

Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"I haven't seen you in class... even once."

Sunny chuckled.

"Of course, you didn't. While you were busy wiping the floor with other Sleepers, I was studying Wilderness Survival."

It was Changing Star's turn to blink.

"Wilderness... what? There is such a course?"

Cassie seemed equally puzzled.

"Yes, there is. It might seem like an afterthought for most people, but for an outskirts kid like me, who never went to a fancy school or saw a private tutor, learning how to survive in the wilderness is the difference between life and death. Without it, I would have drowned the moment we were sent to the Dream Realm."

On a rare occasion, Nephis looked completely bewildered. She rubbed her wrists and stared thoughtfully in his direction.

"I see. I didn't know."

Sunny grimaced and struggled to keep the venom from sipping into his voice. When he finally spoke, his tone was light and amiable.

"That's okay. It's natural for someone of your status not to know..."

When he mentioned her status, a strange smile appeared on the Changing Star's face. But in the end, she didn't reply.

Sunny continued:

"Anyway, that's my Ability. As for Memories, I have three. One is an armor, one is a sword, and the last one is a really loud bell."

Now it was their turn to share. After a short pause, Nephis spoke:

"My attributes give me an affinity to light and fire, as well as a strong affiliation to divinity. I have two Memories: a rope..."

While she was speaking, Sunny was looking at Cassie, trying to read her expression. From what he saw, Nephis was telling the truth — but also, not the whole truth. And judging by how hard the blind girl was trying to hide her true feelings, the secret hiding among Changing Star's Attributes was not at all trivial.

'Interesting.'

"...and a sword. The rope is very sturdy and can change its length. The sword is very sharp and can protect its wielder against souls attacks, to a certain extent. My Ability... can be used to heal."

Sunny didn't miss the wording of the last part. "Can be used to heal"... does this mean that its main purpose was something else? He was pretty sure that Nephis would not reveal all of her cards, just like him. However, healing abilities were extremely rare. Having one that could heal, but was not limited to healing — that would be simply unheard of.

But then again, she was Changing Star — one of the few people in history to receive a True Name in the First Nightmare. If Sunny were to consider his own Aspect Ability, nothing seemed impossible.

'I wonder what's her Aspect rank is.'

Outwardly, he pretended to be excited.

"You're a Healer? That's great! Having a Healer among us is incredible luck!"

Cassie nodded and smiled.

"Neph is also an amazing fighter! You should have seen her dealing with those scavengers. Well... I also did not actually see it. But it sounded very scary."

Sunny didn't need anyone to tell him how formidable of a warrior Nephis was. He had seen it with his own two eyes. Sort of. Actually, they were his shadow's eyes. Well... whatever it had instead of eyes.

Meanwhile, Cassie sighed.

"It's my turn? Uh... my attributes are nothing special. I guess I have an affinity to revelations and fate. My Ability is like I told you before. It's not very useful. About my Memories, I have three: the bottle, the wooden staff and this armor. You already know about the bottle. The staff can create wind. The armor is actually of the Awakened rank... uh, Nephe gave it to me when we met. It has a very powerful protective charm."

'So... she's not only carrying Cassie on her back, she even gave away her only clothes? An Awakened-rank armor, at that? What... what is Nephe thinking about?'

The blind girl turned away and added after a while:

"I used to be a pretty decent fencer... before. Now I can't really fight."

The last two sentences were obviously related to her Flaw. Sunny and Nephe, however, both chose to keep theirs secret. Despite the fact that knowing your companion's Flaw was also important for cooperation and having each other's backs, sharing something like that demanded a very high level of trust.

Right now, there was no trust between them. And even if there was, Sunny did not plan to ever share his Flaw with anyone. Nephe, too, seemed to have a lot of secrets.

After a while, he said:

"Good. That's good. I think we have enough tools to survive, provided we use them right. I guess it's time to sleep?"

In the darkness, Nephe tilted her head, listening to his words with a distant look.

"Alright. I'll... take watch first."

Sunny decided to be helpful and said:

"Actually, my shadow doesn't sleep. It can wake us up if something happens."

Changing Star slowly smiled.

"I'll take watch first."

Feeling a bit of coldness in her voice, Sunny sighed and shrugged.

'Suit yourself. What are you going to watch, huh? You can't even see anything! Whatever. Just don't blame me when something giant swallows us in the middle of the night...'

Then he suddenly shuddered.

'Wait... that was not a death flag, right? Right, of course not. No way...'

Chapter 38: Questions In The Dark

Sleep was avoiding Sunny. For a while, he sat silently in the darkness, listening to the calming rumbling of the waves. In this rare moment of respite, memories of the past few days came flooding into his mind. However, he was too tired to seriously think about anything. He was warm, full, and relatively safe. For now, that was more than enough.

Soon, the rhythm of Cassia's breathing changed, indicating that she fell asleep. Nephis was guarding the camp, motionless and, as always, a bit distant. With her silver hair and fair skin, she looked like an alabaster statue.

Sunny sighed. He struggled for a bit, and then said quietly:

"Hey. Can I ask you a question?"

Nephis glanced at him and shrugged. The lack of an audible response clearly indicated that she remembered about his ability to see in the dark.

"Sure."

'Would it be too personal?'

Sunny hesitated.

"I thought you Legacies come into the Spell with a whole inherited arsenal of Memories. I mean, that's supposed to be your main advantage. How come you only had three?"

Nephis was silent for a few moments.

"Actually, I only had two. The rope came from Cassie."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Oh. I see."

Realizing that her answer wasn't really an answer, Nephis thought for a while and added:

"We lost most of our Memories when my father passed away. The ones that remained were sold one by one over the years, to keep the family afloat. This sword and armor came from my First Nightmare."

So that's how it was. Sunny realized that the fall of the Immortal Flame clan might have been more thorough than he had thought. Still, something about it didn't make sense.

"Surely, with your clan's reputation and standing, there were other ways to make money."

Without any strong reaction, Nephis simply said:

"There were other reasons."

Then, she unexpectedly turned her head in his direction.

"Can I ask you a question in return?"

Sunny swallowed.

"Yeah, go ahead."

Nephis tilted her head.

"How did you know that I'm a Legacy?"

'What? That's it?'

"Simple. I heard Caster mention it. He was scolding other Sleepers to make them treat you with respect."

She gave him a nod and turned away. What thoughts were hidden behind her calm grey eyes, Sunny did not know.

Some time had passed before he gathered enough courage to ask the question that he really wanted to ask. Before doing it, though, he made sure that Cassie was sound asleep and lowered his voice.

"Can I ask another question?"

Without getting a negative response, he continued:

"Why are you burdening yourself with her?"

A corner of Changing Star's mouth curled up slightly.

"Why? Wouldn't you?"

Sunny gritted his teeth, feeling the Flaw pushing the truthful answer out of his mouth.

"No."

To be honest, he wanted to believe to the last moment that the answer would be "yes". But one of the things he had lost after the Nightmare was the ability to lie to himself. Truth was merciless.

It's not that Sunny did not pity the blind girl or didn't want to help her. It's just that he knew with certainty that it was simply not something he could do. He was barely able to save himself, let alone carry a helpless person across the Dream Realm. If he tried, they would just die together.

Still, he couldn't help but be a little disappointed in himself.

Nephis, however, did not seem to judge him. She showed no reaction at all. After a few moments, she simply said:

"Because I want to."

'Because... she wants to?'

That was not the response Sunny expected to hear. He was pretty sure that she would either lecture him about virtue and compassion or disclose some

obscure way to make Cassie's seemingly weak Ability incredibly useful.

However, she did neither. Nephis expected him to believe that she was putting her life in danger, to the point of sacrificing an awakened armor-type Memory, because that was something she simply wanted to do.

'Ridiculous!'

At first, he dismissed her response as a non-answer. But the more he thought about it, the more disturbed he felt.

Because, maybe, it was actually the truth.

Due to the circumstances of his life, Sunny had never really done things because he wanted to. Most of the time, he was doing them because he needed to. It was never a question of "want"... it was always a question of "must". For him, this was a basic rule of life.

But was it really? Or was it just a matter of perspective? Nephis had certain advantages in her upbringing, but they weren't as ample as he had imagined. She had no wealth and no arsenal of relics to empower her. However, she did have a mentality that was different from Sunny's.

It wasn't impossible for her to have the audacity to disregard need in favor of something as frivolous as desire, and do things that a normal person like Sunny would never do.

Like helping a blind girl simply because that was what Nephis wanted to do.

Perhaps, that mentality was the greatest advantage of all.

Perhaps, that was the real barrier that separated Legacies from the rest of them.

That was a lot to think about. However, before Sunny could gather his thoughts, Nephis suddenly spoke again.

"My turn."

'Uh... does she mean it's her turn to ask a question?'

Indeed, that was what she meant. Changing Star once again turned to Sunny and, after a long pause, suddenly asked:

"Do you know the legend of Odysseus?"

'A what... who? What sort of a weird question is that?!'

Bewildered, Sunny shook his head. Then, remembering that she couldn't see him, he said:

"No."

Nephis sighed and turned away. A few moments later, she softly said:

"Odysseus was a hero in an ancient war. In the legends, some humans back then had powers akin to the Awakened. Achilles with an Aspect of indestructible body, Diomedes that was so ferocious even the God of War was wary of him, Ajax who was as strong as a giant. Odysseus was not the strongest, and not the bravest. However, he was the most cunning."

Sunny blinked, staring at the silver-haired girl.

'What? Where did this come from? Why is she suddenly so eloquent?'

Meanwhile, Nephis continued:

"In the end, Odysseus's cunning ended the war, and he prepared to sail home. However, the gods cursed him to endlessly wander the seas, never to return. Over the years, he survived one horror after another and lost all of his companions. Then, shipwrecked, he found himself on an island where the beautiful fairy, Calypso, lived."

Changing Star's ethereal, strangely wistful voice resounded in the darkness, creating an enthralling atmosphere. Sunny couldn't help but listen with the utmost attention.

"Calypso fell in love with Odysseus and invited him to her palace. For many years, they lived together in harmony. The island was like a paradise, filled with all kinds of wonders, delicacies and delights. As long as loving Calypso was by his side, Odysseus was even immortal. But... the longer he stayed, the more time he spent sitting on the shore, looking at the sea with bleak eyes."

Nephis smiled.

"In the end, Odysseus built a makeshift boat and abandoned the island, leaving all its delights, the beautiful fairy, and even his immortality behind. So, my question is... why did he leave?"

Sunny blinked.

'What?'

What kind of a mind game was that? He even considered that Nephis was mocking him, but it didn't seem to be the case. It looked like she was sincerely interested in the answer.

'Weirdo!'

He thought for a bit, and then said without too much conviction:

"Maybe it was because he was far away from home?"

A fleeting smile appeared on Nephis's face.

"Far away... from home. Hm. Alright."

After that, she turned away and lowered her head, becoming like a statue again.

It seemed like their conversation was over.

Grumbling internally, Sunny lay down and tried to fall asleep. However, the image of bleak-eyed Odysseus kept appearing in his mind. After a while, he whispered:

"Well? Did he make it back home?"

Soon, Nephis replied.

"Yes. He returned to his wife and son, and they lived happily ever after."

Satisfied, Sunny smiled and turned on his side.

When he was already half-asleep, he heard Changing Star's quiet voice one again. This time, it was barely audible and aimless, as though not directed at anyone.

"Odysseus was the first human to break the will of gods."

In the morning, Sunny and Nephis were the first to get up. While the sun was rising and the sea was retreating, they made a fire and began preparing a simple breakfast.

With Cassia still asleep, they did not talk to each other much. It was like the last night's conversation did not happen. However, after some time, they somehow ended up discussing the plan for the next few days. Nephis had some ideas.

"With what you told us about scavengers crowding to the west, the logical step would be to start moving east as soon as we can. Of course, north and south are also acceptable, but that won't put as much space between us and the enemy."

Sunny nodded, agreeing with that logic.

"We have explored to the east a little, but not enough to confidently make it to the next high point in a day. That's why the best course of action would be to spend today scouting a path to that group of cliffs over there and move the camp tomorrow."

He sighed.

"Do you have any idea where we are? Would there be a human Citadel to the east?"

Nephis shook her head.

"I've never heard of a region that fits the characteristics of this place. In any case, we have to move to find out more. We'll either find a Citadel, encounter an unconquered Gateway... or die. East is as good of a direction as any. Plus, it's the safest, because there's a horde of monsters to the west."

At that point, Cassie suddenly sat up straight. Her eyes were wide open, and her face was a little pale. She looked nervous and excited.

Nephis frowned.

"Cassie? What's the matter?"

The blind girl turned to them and smiled.

"A... a vision! I had a vision!"

"Like... a prophetic dream?" Sunny thought, trying to come to terms with this new reality of someone being able to see the future. Or the past.

Meanwhile, Changing Star stretched her hand, as though prepared to summon her sword.

"Are we in danger?"

Cassie energetically shook her head.

"No, it's not that! People... I saw a castle full of people!"

She smiled at pointed with her finger.

"I don't know how far it is, but I'm sure that it's in that direction!"

Sunny and Nephis looked at each other, not knowing whether to be glad or petrified.

Cassie's small, delicate finger was confidently pointing west.

Chapter 39: Journey To The West

In the ensuing silence, the smile slowly disappeared from Cassie's face, replaced by confusion. Feeling the sudden tension, she asked:

"Uh... what's wrong?"

Sunny sighed.

"No, nothing is wrong. It's just that that direction is the one we wanted to avoid."

After some thought, he added:

"That's where I came from yesterday. There's a lot of scavengers down there."

The blind girl's face fell.

"Oh."

Nephis, who was quietly listening to them, gave him an indecipherable look and finally spoke:

"Tell us more about the castle."

A shadow of the previous excitement returned to Cassie's eyes. With a serious nod, she began describing her vision.

"I dreamt of a vast, ruined city built of weathered stone. It was surrounded by tall, impregnable walls. Various monsters were wandering its narrow streets. In the center of the city, there was a hill, and on that hill stood a magnificent castle."

She smiled.

"But there were no monsters in the castle! Instead, it was full of people. I think... no, I'm sure that they were Awakened. Some were guarding the walls, some were going about their lives without a care in the world. There was food, safety, and laughter!"

'Well, that sounds great.'

If this castle really existed, then all of their problems would be solved. Sunny cleared his throat.

"Did you see anything else?"

Cassie frowned, trying to remember. Then, her face cleared.

"Yes! I saw Sunny leading me through the gates of the castle! That means we will make it!"

A brilliant smile appeared on her doll-like face, beaming with so much joy that Sunny couldn't help but curl his lips.

Inwardly, however, he was stuck on a certain detail of Cassie's vision. It was that, when talking about reaching the castle, the blind girl only mentioned the two of them. Was there some meaning behind it?

Sunny turned his head a little and secretly glanced at Nephis, trying to discern if she had picked up on that little discrepancy, too.

Changing Star, however, was as enigmatic as ever. Without showing much emotion, she thought for a while, and then slowly nodded.

"Okay. Then we will go west."

While the sea was still retreating, they had their breakfast and then spent some time planning for the journey and preparing to abandon the temporary camp. In the process, Sunny had a chance to get to know the girls a little better.

It was then that he came to a sudden realization, which almost made his head explode from bafflement. That mind-blowing realization had to do with Nephis.

Back when they first met in front of the Academy's gates, Sunny had formed a certain impression of the confident, distant girl. Later, her behavior and the different revelations about Changing Star's past only served to reinforce that impression.

Nephis seemed to exist a bit apart from the world. She was mysterious, aloof and rather cool. Her taciturn character and strange speech patterns made people interacting with her feel unnerved and rattled, often revealing more than they had been planning to. The less she talked, the more she seemed to know. That silent, indifferent confidence was arresting, and sometimes even oppressive.

However, that impression turned out to be completely wrong!

The actual truth behind the matter had nothing to do with being cool and aloof. After talking to her a bit more and observing their interactions with Cassie, Sunny almost fainted when he realized that Nephis was simply an incredibly, ridiculously... painfully awkward person.

It was as though she had no idea how to talk to people. Every time she tried to convey something, she would either use the wrong words or stumble in the middle of the sentence and fall silent. Her tone never matched what she was trying to say. Often, she would forget to put correct intonations in her speech, making questions sound like statements or vice versa.

Added to that was the fact that, like many introverted people, Nephis was not in a habit of openly showing her emotions. It's not that she didn't have feelings: it's just that she was really bad at emoting them! As a result, her face always looked cold and neutral.

That's why, most of the time, she simply chose to talk as little as possible or not to talk at all.

All of that added up together, then multiplied by her general weirdness, was ultimately responsible for creating the false image of a mysterious, unapproachable ice princess.

When in fact, she was just shy and completely inept in communicating with people!

After coming to that realization, Sunny tried with all his might but still failed to stop himself from staring at Nephis with wide eyes. He just barely managed to not let his jaw hang open.

'What the hell? That's not in line with how a protagonist should be!'

In his mind, Nephis had definitely been the type of person to be the main character of any event. At the center stage, there were always confident, strong people like her and Caster. People like himself and Cassie, on the other hand, were relegated to exist far away in the background. Now, however...

No, that line of thought was also wrong. The fact that Changing Star had problems with expressing herself and lacked social skills did not mean that she was not strong. In fact, it might have meant the opposite. She still achieved everything that she had achieved, but with the added layer of adversity.

She was still dangerous.

At that moment, Nephis finally noticed that Sunny was staring at her. She looked at him and, after a long pause, asked in an emotionless tone:

"...What?"

He blinked, extricating himself from this sudden flood of thoughts, and cleared his throat.

"Uh, nothing. I was just going to ask when are we setting off."

Nephis appeared to be thinking. After a while, she turned away and said:

"Soon."

'You... you really can't manage more than one word, can you?'

Utterly bewildered, Sunny hid his emotions and smiled.

"Ah. Alright then."

In the grey light of morning, they abandoned the tall hill and ventured west, retracing their steps from yesterday. Knowing the path, the small party made quick progress.

Nephis was walking in front, her sword arm ready to strike at any moment. A bit behind her was Sunny. This time, the responsibility of holding the golden rope and guiding Cassie along was entrusted to him.

Of course, the actual person... creature?... leading them was his shadow. It scouted ahead, carefully observing the labyrinth for signs of danger.

The labyrinth was just as it was before, confusing and seemingly endless. Crimson blades of "coral" protruded from the black mud, creating a vast, tangled forest. However, today something about it felt different.

It wasn't long before the shadow stumbled onto a mass of hulking, hungry scavengers...

Chapter 40: Weak Point | Shadow Slave

"Halt!" Sunny whispered, observing the group of scavengers through his shadow.

As soon as the word left his lips, Nephis immediately summoned her sword. After studying the surroundings for a second, she turned her head and glanced at him with a question in her eyes.

Cassia, meanwhile, froze in place and hesitantly raised her staff.

Sunny counted the monsters: one, two, three... five...

'Curses!'

The hulking beasts seemed like the losers of the pack, similar to the one he had killed. However, their wounds were not as pronounced and terrible. Each of them was much more of a threat than the mangled one from before, and there were half a dozen of them at least.

"There are scavengers on the path ahead, six of them. They're slowly moving in our direction."

Nephis cast a gaze forward. There was a calculating look on her face.

"They're done with the carcass?"

Sunny thought for a moment and then shook his head.

"No, I don't think so. But maybe there's not enough meat for everyone anymore, so some stragglers had no choice but to leave with an empty stomach."

Nephis nodded and gestured to a nearby branching path.

"We'll circle around them."

The three Sleepers hastily moved forward and changed paths, giving a wide berth to the group of monsters. Tense and grim, they continued walking, trying to stay on course and not get lost in the labyrinth.

However, in the next hour, they had to turn in a random direction again and again, avoiding other scavengers. The distance between them and the giant statue was not shortening at all.

At some point, they were catching their breath near one of the numerous dead ends of the crimson labyrinth. They had no choice but to wait, since a large number of creatures was moving past their hiding spot, separated from them by a long length of a twisting coral passage.

Sunny sighed and shook his head.

"We can't go on like that. At this rate, we'll never make it to safety before sunset."

Cassie was the first one to react.

"Maybe... maybe we should turn back?"

That was a reasonable suggestion. However, Sunny felt reluctant to agree.

Nephis shared his thoughts. With a blank expression, she said:

"It will only get harder tomorrow."

She was right. By tomorrow, there would be even more scavengers flooding the labyrinth.

"Then what should we do?"

Changing Star tilted her head, thinking. After a while, she turned to Sunny.

"Fight."

Fight? Fight against dozens of those monstrosities? Was she crazy?

Sunny tried to hide his derision as he spoke:

"I know that you are skilled with the sword, but have you forgotten that each of those things is a whole rank above us? We won't survive in a fight against many."

Nephis nodded.

"We avoid large groups. Cut down smaller ones."

After a moment, she added:

"If there's one or two of them, there's a chance."

Sunny wanted to retort, but couldn't find a good reason. In the end, he gave up.

"Fine."

Nephis stared at him for a while. Then, she suddenly asked:

"Have you studied the corpse of the scavenger you had killed?"

What was that supposed to mean?

A bit surprised, Sunny shook his head.

"No."

He was too busy being in pain and trying to make it to safety before the sea returned. And why would he study a corpse?

'Wait. I think Teacher Julius mentioned something...'

After a short pause, Nephis spoke:

"Scavengers have three weak points on their bodies. The first one is obvious: it's their joints. Anything that has to be flexible can't be too rigid.

So, there's gaps in the armor above the joints. By targeting the joints, you can diminish their mobility and attack capacity."

Oh... so, by studying a dead monster, one could better understand their strengths and vulnerabilities. This idea was so obvious that Sunny admonished himself for not realizing sooner.

Meanwhile, Nephis continued:

"The second one is the same. It's where their torso connects to the carapace. If you manage to accurately hit that spot, you can heavily injure a scavenger and deal serious damage to its body. However, unless you succeed in severing its spine, the wound won't be fatal. It'll still be able to fight for a while."

Sunny couldn't help but notice that Changing Star's awkwardness seemed to disappear whenever she talked about things that she felt confident about, like ancient heroes. Or killing things.

'Curious.'

"The last weak point is on their back, approximately at the level where the eyes are. There's a slightly concave, discolored cavity in their armor. It is where several armor plates connect. The chitin there is comparatively thin. If you can pierce through it, you can destroy the brain directly. That will be a killing blow."

'That is good to know. However, that weak point was too high to be hit by a human — after all, scavengers were more than two meters tall!'

As though reading his thoughts, Nephis added:

"That weak point is very hard to target. Circling around a scavenger is almost impossible due to their size, speed and the attack range of their pincers."

She looked at him and calmly said:

"If we stumble on a single scavenger, I'll be the bait. My task will be to make it turn around and then restrain it, exposing the third weak point. Your task will be to kill it."

Sunny gulped.

"What if there's two of them?"

As usual, Nephis paused before answering.

"Don't die."

It wasn't long before they were left with no choice but to attempt a fight against a scavenger. Behind them, there was a long stretch of the labyrinth with no suitable branching paths for them to turn onto. Ahead of them, there was a small clearing with only one other passage leading out of it.

Not far into that passage, a massive scavenger was moving slowly in their direction.

Sunny quickly described the situation and waited for Changing Star's feedback. Without much delay, she gave him a nod.

"We fight in the clearing."

After that, Nephis gently guided Cassie to the wall of the labyrinth and helped her find a place to sit.

"Wait here. We'll be back."

After some thought, she added.

"Soon."

As Nephis moved to walk away, Cassie grabbed her hand. Her face was pale and tense.

"Neph, you... be careful, okay?"

Nephis blinked and tilted her head a little. Then, she smiled.

"Uh. Sure."

With that, she and Sunny hastily headed for the clearing.

By the time they got there, the scavenger was seconds from appearing. Sunny's shadow flew out of the passage and reattached itself to his feet. Without having to discuss things with Nephis, he quickly hid in the shadows and waited there, hoping for a chance to attack.

Nephis, on the other hand, strolled to the center of the clearing and calmly stood there, her shoulders relaxed and her back straight. An elegant longsword appeared in her hands, carelessly pointed to the ground.

Not knowing what else to do, Sunny silently repeated her words:

'Don't die.'

A second later, the scavenger walked into the clearing. When his tiny eyes spotted Nephis, an evil light ignited in them. Without wasting even a second, the massive monster screeched and rushed forward to attack.

Its huge pincer shot forward with terrifying speed, tearing the air in its path.

Nephis swiftly sidestepped, dodging the pincer, then leaped backward, removing herself from the path of the rushing monster. Simultaneously, her sword flashed in the air, cutting deep into the joint of one of the scavenger's front legs.

Azure blood splattered on the ground.

Of course, this small wound was too insignificant to slow the scavenger down. With surprising agility, it twisted and delivered a crushing sideways swipe. Nephis, who just barely landed on her feet, had no choice but to deflect the blow with her sword. She managed to disperse most of the

impact by holding the blade at the right angle, but the remaining force was still enough to throw her off balance.

At that moment, the second pincer came down. Instead of trying to regain her equilibrium, Changing Star went with the fall and somersaulted over one hand, ending up distancing herself from the monster a bit. Her sword lashed out again.

The follow-up attack followed almost immediately.

However, Sunny did not care about the details anymore. The only thing he cared about was that, through this risky series of dodges and leaps, Nephis had managed to circle to the opposite side of the clearing, forcing the scavenger to turn its back to the shadow in which he hid.

'It's now or never!'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny lunged forward.

Before Changing Star finished her last dodge...

Before the scavenger's pincer crashed on her from above...

Before Sunny had time to become scared...

He closed the distance between himself and the monster and jumped with all his might, landing on top of its carapace. Then, he used all of his weight to thrust a hand forward.

Azure Blade shimmered into existence in his grip and was immediately swallowed by the shadow. A breath later, the dark blade hit precisely into the concave, discolored cavity in the scavenger's armor. With a crack, the chitin broke, allowing the tip of the sword to sink deep into the scavenger's body.

The monster shuddered, and then heavily fell to the ground.

Sunny was thrown from its carapace, landing in the mud with a roll.

'That... that easy?'

It was already over?

As though to answer him, the Spell's voice resounded in the air:

[You have slain an awakened beast, Carapace Scavenger.]

[...Your shadow grows stronger.]

Chapter 41: Strength In Numbers

Sunny was sprawled in the mud, looking at the sky. He didn't even have to catch his breath since the whole fight took less than ten seconds from start to finish. No one was dead, wounded or even bruised... well, with the exception of the scavenger. It was completely out of his expectations.

He glanced at the monster's corpse to make sure that it was actually dead, then summoned the runes and took a look at the number of Shadow Fragments in his possession.

[Shadow Fragments: 16/1000].

It was actually true. The mighty awakened beast perished just like that. And, although Nephis did most of the work, he was the one to deal the killing blow.

'Why can't it always be so easy?'

Sunny got back on his feet and dismissed the Azure Blade. Then, he remembered the words Master Jet had once told him: "No one can survive in the Dream Realm alone."

Back then, he noted her advice, but didn't really believe it. After all, he had always strived to be self-sufficient, not allowing himself to depend on anyone. In Sunny's mind, this was the true meaning of strength.

However, now he was beginning to suspect that this logic was flawed. Indeed, having someone to share your burdens meant the difference between heaven and hell here in the Dream Realm. If he was alone, fighting against a single scavenger might have been the end of him.

Similarly, even though Nephis was far more skilled than Sunny, it would have been extremely hard for her to defeat the armored monster alone, being that its weakest point was out of her reach.

But together, they had accomplished it with relative ease. The whole was greater than the sum of the parts. In other words, there was strength in numbers that surpassed individual power. In that sense, being able to depend on a group was not a sign of weakness, but, on the contrary, an important facet of personal strength.

Lone wolves would always be at a disadvantage. That was another lesson to learn.

'It's not like I had much of a choice.'

He walked over to Nephis and checked if she was okay. Apart from slight damage to her makeshift seaweed clothes, everything seemed to be alright. She glanced at Sunny.

"Memory?"

He shook his head.

Nephis sighed. It seemed that she was a bit impatient to get herself a suit of armor of her own. If Sunny was a gentleman, he would have suggested to loan her the Puppeteer's Shroud for a while... but alas, he wasn't. That armor was extremely valuable and had cost him a lot.

Plus, unlike Changing Star, the picture of Sunny wearing nothing but a seaweed loincloth would have been more disturbing than aesthetically pleasing. So, he said nothing.

Meanwhile, Nephis headed for the dead scavenger and said without turning her head:

"Bring Cassie."

With a sigh, Sunny turned around and left the clearing.

Soon, he approached the place where the blind girl was waiting patiently for their return. Hearing his footsteps, she flinched and raised her head:

"S—Sunny?"

'How did she recognize me? Ah... must be the way I walk.'

"Yeah, it's me. Everything is over. Come on, I'll bring you to Nephis."

Using the wooden staff, Cassie stood up and turned to him.

"Are... are you guys alright?"

Sunny smiled.

"Of course! We dispatched that critter in no time. Didn't even get a scratch."

Cassie smiled with visible relief.

"Good, that's good. Oh, right, the rope..."

Sunny took the rope and guided the blind girl back to the clearing. On the way, he felt a bit weird. With the delicate girl walking behind him, he couldn't help but think of his little sister. As a toddler, she used to follow him around too, as though they were glued together.

As the familiar pain stabbed him in the heart, Sunny gritted his teeth and tried to think about something else. It was all in the past anyway.

Back in the clearing, Nephis was done breaking apart the scavenger's carapace. The shimmering soul shard was already in her hand. Without saying anything, she tossed it to Sunny.

He caught the crystal and looked at her with surprise.

"Why are you giving it to me?"

Nephis blinked and stayed quiet for a few seconds. Then she said as a matter of fact:

"I don't have pockets."

"Oh."

Still a bit bewildered, Sunny put the soul shard into his rucksack.

'But why wouldn't she just absorb it?'

He opened his mouth to ask the question, but she seemed to realize something and added:

"We'll divide the spoils later."

"Ah. Alright."

Nephis, meanwhile, turned to Cassie and said after some deliberation:

"I was careful."

Then, she smiled.

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Sunny was feeling somewhere in-between of being ecstatic and peeved. Throughout the day, they managed to kill three more scavengers, each time with not much risk to anyone except for Nephis. The process was largely the same: after discovering the monster, he would hide in the shadows, while Nephis would act as bait. Then, when the time was right, Sunny would stealthily approach and finish the fight with a precise strike of the Azure Blade.

He was wondering if that was what being in the main hero's party felt like. To anyone else, maybe with the exception of Caster, dancing around a deadly awakened beast would have been a tall task, most likely ending with the dancer's death. Nephis, however, had managed to do it over and over again seemingly without too much strain.

What's more, her performance was based solely on skill, with no Aspect Ability involved. In that regard, even Caster couldn't have done better.

She was swift, calm and precise. Every move she made was calculated and perfectly timed. She seemed to innately understand the flow and logic of combat, which gave her the ability to roughly predict what actions the mindless beasts would perform in the next seconds. Then it was just the question of physical prowess to evade and even manipulate them to a certain degree.

Sunny had always known that skill and experience were more important than raw power, but by watching Nephis, he vividly understood just how vast the difference between them was. Even though his divine Aspect allowed Sunny to exert more strength and speed than Changing Star, in an actual fight, he would never stand a chance.

Of course, he was also an important part of every encounter. His role as the finisher was not trivial, and not just anybody would have been able to accomplish four kills with four strikes. Even though Sunny was not taught any elaborate techniques, he was still a somewhat experienced fighter. He had good physical coordination, combat intuition, and — most importantly — a cool-headed mentality.

Not to mention the fact that they were only able to ambush the scavengers so effectively due to his shadow scouting them out in advance.

All in all, it was an almost equal cooperation. Still, watching Nephis fight was nothing short of sobering.

Trying not to get too dejected, Sunny summoned the runes.

[Shadow Fragments: 22/1000].

'Eight fragments today. Pretty excellent.'

Currently, they were waiting on the edge of the labyrinth path leading directly to the giant statue of the headless knight. There was a group of scavengers between them and the statue, moving past without any haste.

The sunset was near, but they still had time.

Slowly, minutes flowed by. At some point, Nephis gave the command to move.

Helping Cassie along, Sunny followed Changing Star and quickly traversed the open space between the labyrinth and the statue. Now, they only had to get on top of it.

However, it wasn't that easy. Scaling the two-hundred-meter tall monument would have been hard in normal circumstances, but now, they also had to somehow pull Cassie up. Leaving her behind until they were at the top would not have been safe.

In the end, Nephis and Sunny took turns pulling the rope every twenty meters or so. Cassie would hold onto the rocks and wait until they climbed higher, and then the process would repeat. It was slow and torturous, and by the end, Sunny's muscles were sore and almost on fire.

But they managed to get to safety before the dark waters washed them away.

As the night began to descend, the three Sleepers sat in the center of the circular stone platform and rested. As they did not bring any materials to make a fire and it was already too late, there was no way to cook food. They ended up chewing on the strips of dried meat, passing the bottle of limitless water around.

After some time, Nephis gave Sunny a sign to take out the spoils of today's journey. He took out the four shimmering soul shards and put them on the ground.

Without any discussion, Changing Star moved two crystals in his direction and took two for herself. Then, she gave one of hers to Cassia.

Sunny watched it in silence. By the time Nephis and Cassie had absorbed their soul shards, he still didn't make a move to take his. After a while, he took another crystal out of the rucksack and moved all three to Nephis.

The silver-haired girl looked at him with surprise.

"Don't you want... to grow stronger?"

Sunny grinned.

"Of course, I do. But these won't do me much good right now. It's no secret that you are the main fighting force of our group."

He sighed.

"The stronger you are, the better our chances of survival will get. Plus, it's not a gift. It's a trade."

Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"A... trade? What do you want?"

Sunny deliberated for a few seconds before answering.

"It's rather simple. I will give you these soul shards, and all other soul shards I earn on the way to that castle..."

Then, he looked her in the eyes and said:

"In return, you will teach me how to fight."

Chapter 42: Essence Of Combat

Nephis looked at him and contemplated. This time, she remained silent longer than usual.

Sunny felt a bit nervous under her gaze, knowing that he was being evaluated. With Changing Star's skill and insight, it wasn't hard to imagine just how much she had gleaned from his battle performance. Both his current level and future potential must have been pretty much laid bare in front of her. Were they enough to make teaching him worth her while?

After some time, she took the soul shards and nodded.

"Okay."

Sunny smiled, congratulating himself on a successful deal. Not only did he receive a lot while not losing much, but he had also managed to create a bit of a favorable impression of himself in the eyes of Nephis and Cassie. As far as performances went, this was a great one.

"So when do we start?"

Nephis shrugged.

"Now."

Now?

Sunny glanced at the sun, which was already almost gone. Were they going to train in complete darkness? It wasn't really an obstacle for him. Changing Star, however...

"We will start with some words. That will be enough for today."

After hesitating a little, she added:

"Cassie, you listen too."

Sunny and Cassia turned to Nephis, listening to her like two obedient students. Despite the fact that their age was more or less similar, both knew that, in terms of martial prowess, their companion had authority that was as beyond theirs as a dragon's might was beyond that of a worm.

Nephis thought for a while and then said:

"Mastery of combat can be divided into two aspects. One is body, and the other one is mind. Training the body is not easy, but it is rather simple. All you need is repetition and experience. In a fight, things happen too fast to consider every detail in the moment. That's why your technique must exist in your muscles and bones, so much so that it almost becomes an instinct."

She paused.

"You can achieve initial results through repetition. Then, it must be cemented through experience. The more battle experience you have, the deeper a technique will be assimilated into your body. There is no other way. A thousand hours of training won't be as impactful as one real fight. Only those who survive countless battles can be truly in command of the body."

That simultaneously made a lot of sense and no sense at all. On the one hand, the principle of improving through practice was quite logical. On the other hand, Changing Star's statement made it seem like all those lofty Legacies with their years of training were nothing but harmless children. After all, no matter how good their tutors were, they had no real battle experience.

But then again, she did wipe the floor with every one of them — excluding Caster — with no apparent difficulty. So maybe her statement was true. That, however, posed a question of its own... just what kind of life had Nephis led to possess rich battle experience at the tender age of eighteen?

'Should I stop calling her "princess"?'

Meanwhile, Nephis continued:

"Training the mind, however, is not simple at all. That is because, once you reach a certain level of skill, the mind is where the true combat takes place. The outcome is often decided before your body begins to move. And to master the mind, the first step is to understand the essence of combat. However, very few people truly do."

She looked at them and asked:

"What do you think that essence is?"

Sunny hesitated. The... essence of combat? What might it be?

If it was some other Legacy, he would have been tempted to say something stupid like "honor", "valor" or "duty". But he already knew that Nephis did not fit into the image of a noble aristocrat he had in his mind. She wasn't someone who followed empty words.

After a minute or so, Cassie finally answered:

"Victory."

And almost at the same time, Sunny said:

"Survival."

Changing Star shook her head.

"No."

Then she rubbed her neck and pierced them with a cold, fierce gaze.

"The essence of combat is murder."

Cassie flinched and opened her eyes wide. Sunny frowned a little. Nephis, however, did not seem to care. In the same calm tone, she continued:

"At the core of it, there is only this: you are trying to kill your opponent, and they are trying to kill you. In the end, one of you will be killed, and the other one will be the killer. Everything else is just noise."

Her words sank deep into Sunny's heart and reverberated there, causing something inside of him to resonate and awaken.

"Style doesn't matter. Weapons don't matter. Reason and intent do not matter. The only thing that matters is to be the last one standing. In this way, anything you do in combat must be viewed as only serving one of two purposes: either to kill your enemy or to prevent the enemy from killing you."

Nephis lowered her eyes.

"If you can understand that, you will have enough clarity to master the mind."

After that, Sunny couldn't fall asleep for a long while. He lay on the cold stone, looking into the darkness and thinking about what Nephis had taught them.

'Repetition, experience, clarity.'

These were the three keys to becoming a fearsome warrior. All three were important, but the last one was the most vexing.

Was it really how Changing Star had said? Was there nothing at the core of being a warrior than a cold will to kill? Intuitively, he felt that it was indeed so. This ruthless truth was, in a sense, an amalgamation of all his life experiences.

After all, for someone like him, life was nothing but a constant battle for survival. Someone always won, and someone always lost. The former got to live for a few more days, the latter... no one cared what happened to them.

Of course, life was life, and combat was combat. To most people, they weren't one and the same. But what about the Awakened? The sole purpose of their existence was to fight against the Nightmare Creatures. Very few could escape that fate.

After coming to the Academy, Sunny allowed himself to think that he had escaped the fate of always having to struggle at the edge of survival. But now, it seemed like he had just exchanged one battle for another.

This was an uncomfortable thought.

However, if he looked at it from a different perspective... did it actually mean that he always had a crucial advantage? Most of those chosen by the Spell were forced to somehow adjust to this merciless way of life. But he had always lived like this.

Was he actually one of the few perfectly suited to be an Awakened?

With this thought, Sunny fell asleep.

... In the early morning, he was awakened by a piercing scream.

Chapter 43: Repetition | Shadow Slave

Sunny was on his feet even before fully waking up. Somehow, Azure Blade was already in his hand. His shadow was hovering beside him, ready to either wrap itself around the sword in case he needed to attack or around his body, in case it was already too late for that.

He tried to understand what was going on. Nephis was nearby, her longsword raised in a defensive stance. Cassie...

'Where's Cassie?'

Fearing what he might see — giant tentacles reaching for them from the darkness — he looked around. The eastern horizon was just beginning to show the first hints of dawn, adding a tiny shade of grey to the blackness of the world. In that blackness, there were no signs of danger.

Finally, he saw Cassie.

The blind girl was stumbling at the edge of the platform with a horrified expression on her face. With her blond hair in a mess, she was stretching her hands out, clearly lost in space. Of course, there were no walls for her to find. The platform was opened to the elements, and the only thing waiting for Cassie was a plunge into the dark, tumultuous waters...

Before Sunny knew what he was doing, he was already running. That wasn't a very smart thing to do — after all, he did not know what had caused Cassia to scream and if there was some hidden danger nearby. Plus, it was still too dark for Nephis to see. His sudden lunge could have caused her to lash out with the sword before asking questions...

All of these were good reasons to wait and observe first, but in an uncharacteristic and completely irrational manner, Sunny acted before thinking.

He caught Cassie moments before she took a step off the platform and, holding her tightly in his arms, dragged the blind girl back.

"I got her!" Sunny yelled, letting Changing Star know that there was no need to stab him with a sword.

And then, in a quiet voice, he said to Cassie:

"I got you. It's alright. Everything is fine. Calm down..."

He felt the girl's body trembling and looked around again, trying to understand what had scared her so much. But there was nothing.

Nephis was listening to the sea for the same reason. After a few seconds, she asked:

"Do you see anything?"

Sunny helplessly shook his head.

"No."

He helped Cassie sit down in the center of the platform. While Nephis stood guard above them, he looked the blind girl over to make sure that there were no wounds on her body. Everything seemed to be fine.

"She's not hurt anywhere."

Changing Star looked down. Although her face remained indifferent, he could tell that she was a bit flustered. After a second or two, she asked in something that might have been her version of a calming tone. It sounded pretty much exactly the same as usual:

"Cassie? What happened?"

Magically, that did seem to calm the blind girl down a little. At least enough for her to speak in a quivering voice.

Cassie extended one hand and pointed down.

"Th—the head... I saw... oh gods!"

Sunny frowned and looked at Nephis.

"Did she see a vision? The past?"

The tall girl was silent for a moment.

"I don't know. It never happened before."

Both of them turned to Cassie, not sure what to do.

Since there was no apparent danger around, they took turns trying to calm the horrified girl down. However, after that one sentence, she fell quiet and refused to speak again. Nothing seemed to help.

After a while, Nephis sighed.

"Let's... leave her be, for now. Maybe she needs time."

Sunny was about to retort, but, truth be told, he didn't have any ideas either. In the end, he just nodded.

"Okay. I'll keep an eye on her."

Changing Star, however, had other ideas.

As the sun was rising and the surging sea was receding, Nephis chose to give Cassie some space and led Sunny to the edge of the platform. However, she made sure to always have the blind girl in the periphery of her vision.

Cassia sat hugging her knees. Her eyes were closed, but small tremors that periodically ran through her body betrayed that she was awake.

Sunny's eye twitched.

"Are you sure it's okay to leave her like this?"

Nephis gave him a complicated look.

"Yes."

Then, after some thought, she added:

"Cassie is strong."

Sunny wasn't sure how to answer. If Changing Star considered someone to be strong, then they most likely were. However, "strong" was the last word that came to his mind when he thought about the delicate, beautiful, blind girl. Wasn't she someone who constantly needed their help?

But then again, there were different kinds of strength. Cassia was still alive and sane despite her debilitating Flaw. How many people could have done the same?

"If you say so."

Then, Nephis made him summon the Azure Blade. After studying it for a while, she nodded and took her longsword out of the air.

Despite its size, it was an elegant weapon. The narrow, double-edged blade was much longer than that of the Azure Blade, with an incredibly sharp, symmetrical tip. The whole blade, as well as the simple cross-shaped guard and the pommel, seemed to be made out of silver and reflected the pale morning light. The handle was tightly wrapped in black leather.

Putting the two swords side by side, Nephis spoke:

"Your sword can be used with one hand, but its true potential can only be revealed when held in both. It is created primarily for cutting and severing, hence the higher center of gravity. However, it can thrust as well."

Then she gestured to hers:

"My sword is a bit more versatile. It is created for both cutting and thrusting, and it has a double edge. However, the principle of wielding these two swords is effectively the same."

She took the sword in both hands, placing one near the guard and another near the pommel. Then, she performed a downward slash.

"They are both leverage-based weapons. When held with two hands, one hand pushes," she pushed the sword down with the hand near the guard. "While the other hand pulls."

The hand near the pommel simultaneously pulled the handle up, giving the blade a tremendous boost in speed.

"This is how you generate force and perform powerful strikes. Now, your turn."

Sunny looked at his sword and gripped it with both hands, mimicking Nephis's pose. Then, he raised it and slashed down, making sure to enhance the force of the strike with his lower hand.

Changing Star observed him.

"You need to understand that a strike doesn't come from the hands. It comes from your whole body. Power comes from your feet, your hips, your core, your shoulders, and is only then transmitted to your hands. Like this."

She demonstrated the downward slash again. This time, Sunny paid attention to the overall stance and movements of every part of Changing Star's body, as opposed to only the sword.

He wasn't a novice to fighting: instinctively, he already knew how to deliver a proper punch... even if, before, there wasn't a lot of strength in his body. The principles of striking with a sword were largely the same, so Sunny quickly understood the overall concept.

He performed the simple downward slash a few more times. After each time, Nephis gave him pointers and corrected his mistakes. Some time later, she was finally satisfied with his form.

"Good."

Sunny smiled, proud of his achievements.

Nephis looked at him thoughtfully and nodded.

"Now, do it a thousand more times."

The smile froze on Sunny's face.

'A... thousand? Did she say a thousand?!'

He blinked.

"Uh... sorry. How many times?"

Changing Star tilted her head and thought for some time.

"Well... we don't have much time today. So, yes. Only a thousand."

'Ha. Ha-ha. "Only" a thousand, eh?'

Sunny forced himself to sound polite.

"I see. Alright."

As Nephis walked back to sit with Cassie, he turned to the sea and raised his sword.

'One'.

The Azure Blade whistled as it cut the air. He raised it again.

'Two.'

Push and pull. This is how you generate force.

'Three.'

Strike with your whole body, not just your hands.

'Four.'

As Sunny raised his sword and slashed down, over and over again, only one thought eventually remained in his mind:

'Repetition, experience, clarity. Repetition...'

By the time he was done performing a thousand strikes, Cassie was finally ready to speak.

Chapter 44: Cassie's Dream | Shadow Slave

With pretty much every muscle in his body sore, Sunny walked over to the girls and fell on the ground. After catching his breath, he looked at Cassia.

"Cassie? Do you feel better?"

Several seconds later, the blind girl slowly nodded.

'That's a relief.'

He shifted and hesitated for a bit. Cassia didn't look too well. Her face was still very pale, with a distant, dazed expression on it. Her body at least was no longer trembling. Sunny wasn't very good at talking to people, let alone placating them. He wasn't sure what to say.

He cast a gaze at Nephis and sighed inwardly. Who knew that one day he would turn out to be the most sociable person for as far as the eye could see? What a joke...

"Can I have some water?"

Cassie turned to him and scowled, as though confused by the question. Then, she suddenly gasped and opened her eyes wide.

"Oh! Oh, sorry. Yes, of course..."

She summoned the limitless water bottle and offered it to Sunny. He took it with a grateful smile and greedily drank a few gulps before giving the bottle to Nephis. Eventually, it returned to Cassie.

"You drink some too."

After she did, he awkwardly patted the blind girl on the shoulder.

"Everything seems to be fine now. Uh... did you dream of another vision? You can tell us. If you want."

Cassie hesitated for a bit before saying:

"I... don't know. Maybe it was just a nightmare."

Sunny and Nephis exchanged glances. They both doubted that what Cassie saw was a simple nightmare. After all, people usually did not dream in the Dream Realm. The blind girl, meanwhile, continued:

"I don't really remember. It's all in fragments."

Sunny carefully considered his words, not wanting to pressure Cassie too much.

"You can just tell us what you remember. Maybe we'll be able to make sense of it together."

Cassia sighed and tentatively nodded. After a long pause, she finally found the courage to speak:

"At first, I saw a... a boundless darkness locked behind seven seals. Something vast was churning in the darkness. I felt like if I directly saw it, I would lose my mind. As I watched, terrified, the seals broke one after another, until only one remained. And then that seal broke, too."

She trembled a little.

"After that... I don't know. It was as though my mind shattered into a thousand shards, each shard reflecting its own image. Most of them were dark and scary. Some I have already forgotten. The other..."

Cassie fell silent, remembering.

"I saw the human castle again. Only this time, it was at night. There was a lonely star burning in the black skies, and under its light, the castle was suddenly consumed by fire, with rivers of blood flowing down its halls. I saw a corpse in a golden armor sitting on a throne; a woman with a bronze spear drowning in a tide of monsters; an archer trying to pierce the falling sky with his arrows."

Finally, she looked up, her face full of horror.

"In the end, I saw a colossal, terrifying crimson spire. At its base, seven severed heads were guarding seven locks. And at the top, a... a dying angel was being consumed by hungry shadows. When I saw the angel bleed, I suddenly felt as though... as though something so precious that it can't be described with words was taken from me."

Her voice became quieter.

"Then, I felt so much sorrow, pain and rage that what little remained of my sanity seemed to disappear. That was when I woke up... I think."

Nephis and Sunny remained silent for a while, trying to make sense of what Cassie had told them. Even if Nephis had an idea, she didn't show it. Sunny, however, was totally lost. He couldn't even begin to decipher the hidden meaning behind the vision... if it even was one.

Previously, Cassia's vision about the castle was pretty much straightforward. It showed her a human fortress and even the direction in which it was situated. This time, however, her dream was disjointed, full of weird symbolism and vague, uncertain images, much more like a charlatan's prophecy than a vision gained through an Aspect Ability.

Finally, he sighed.

"Maybe it actually was just a nightmare. Your previous visions weren't like this, right?"

Cassie silently shook her head.

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"Well... people don't usually dream in the Dream Realm, but you do. Perhaps seeing a random nightmare once in a while is a side effect of your ability."

The blind girl turned to him, a faint relief written on her face.

"You really think so?"

He hesitated, trying to find the right words.

"Why not? It's a possibility."

Inwardly, however, he felt uneasy.

'A dying angel being consumed by shadows... why does it sound so ominous? I should try and stay away from angels in the future. Gee, what has become of my life. A sentence like that doesn't even sound insane anymore...'

With that, they were finally ready to welcome a new day.

Some time later, they were sitting on the western edge of the stone platform, looking at the scavengers below. Sunny's shadow was busy scouting a path to the next high landmark.

"Were there always that many?"

Sunny glanced at Nephis and shook his head.

"No, there were much more. They seem to be almost done with the carcass. I doubt it will last until nightfall."

Which meant that, by tomorrow, all these beasts would be roaming the labyrinth, making it hard for the three Sleepers to make any progress. It would be best to leave today and put some distance between themselves and the horde before the scavengers were done with their feast.

However, without scouting a path in advance, there was a chance of not making it to safety in time. Both options were risky.

Nephis frowned, seemingly thinking the same.

After a while, she said:

"I don't want Cassie to spend another night near this statue. Let's leave now."

Sunny thought for a while, then opened his mouth to offer his own opinion. However, a sudden commotion below prevented him from speaking.

Down at the bottom of the disappearing sea, amidst mounds of broken coral, the carcass of the giant shark-like monster — the remaining half of it, to be precise — was almost stripped of meat. And between its white bones, something was shimmering in the mud.

Two extremely large, luminescent crystals.

Sunny's eyes widened.

"Are those..."

"Yes. Shards of two transcendent soul cores."

Transcendent... two of them...

Suddenly, he was simultaneously filled with greed and fear. Greed because of how rare and precious transcendent soul shards were; fear because the giant shark turned to be a corrupted devil, at least.

One corrupted devil, if not stopped by a Saint or a large number of Awakened, could potentially destroy an entire city. Sunny belatedly realized that he was much closer to death on that first night than he had previously thought.

"Should we..."

"Wait and listen."

He stared at Nephis and then obediently listened to the distant, barely audible clamor of the scavengers.

After a while, he noticed some disharmony in it.

Nephis suddenly tensed up.

"There."

She pointed in the direction of the labyrinth. After concentrating on it, Sunny was finally able to notice two massive shadows stepping out of a particularly wide passage.

A second later, the creatures casting those shadows appeared in sight. Sunny gulped.

'Damn.'

The monsters looked like the scavengers, but not quite. To start with, they were much larger, towering above the surroundings at more than three meters of height. Their carapace seemed to be thicker. It was colored in deep black and scarlet, like an ancient armor drenched in blood. Here and there, vicious-looking spikes were growing out of the carapace, making their every move much more dangerous.

Additionally, instead of heavy pincers, their upper arms ended with long, curved, terrifying bone scythes.

Sunny felt cold sweat running down his spine.

"What the hell are those things?"

Nephis tilted her head.

"Monsters, I guess."

Nightmare Creatures with one soul core were called "beasts". They were dangerous and strong, but mindless. If they were able to develop or were created with a second core, they became "monsters". Monsters were much more devastating and possessed some rudimentary, warped form of intelligence. They were the next step in a Nightmare Beast's evolution.

And these two seemed to be bigger, deadlier versions of carapace scavengers.

Sunny and Nephis watched as the two monsters approached the carcass. The scavengers were visibly afraid of them, rushing to get out of the way. Those who were too slow were mercilessly thrown to the side or cut apart by the bone scythes. Rivers of azure blood were flowing into the mud.

'What are they doing? Did they come to absorb the soul shards?'

Finally, the monsters reached the carcass. Each of them took one of the shards. However, instead of absorbing them, they simply turned around and carried the precious crystals away. The scavengers made way, following the shards with their little, hungry eyes.

Sunny blinked and looked at Nephis.

"Do we still leave now?"

Changing Star frowned and hesitated. A few moments later, she shook her head.

"No. We'll go tomorrow."

Then, she turned west and observed the retreating monsters.

"...Get your shadow to follow these two back."

Chapter 45: Sound Of Laughter

Because of the shadow fragments Sunny had absorbed in the last few days, the range of Shadow Control has increased a little. However, it was still far from being enough to explore deep into the labyrinth. He only got the general direction in which the two large monsters were moving.

They were going west.

After telling this to Nephis, there was pretty much nothing else for him to do. In the end, Sunny decided to simply rest — the next day was promising to be full of hardships and danger, so it was in his best interest to let his body recover as much as it could.

Some time later, Sunny was lying on his back, staring at the grey sky. Cassie was sitting beside him, lost in her thoughts. Nephis was meditating. At least, that's what it looked like: she might as well had been asleep, for all Sunny knew.

After a while, Cassie turned to him.

"Sunny?"

He tilted his head to look at her.

"Yeah?"

The blind girl hesitated.

"Do you... do you think we'll be able to return home?"

Sunny glanced at her and furrowed his brow. A few seconds later, he turned away and looked at the sky again.

"Sure."

Cassie smiled:

"You really think so? Why?"

'What's with all these questions?'

He sighed and tried to find the right words.

"Because of her."

He pointed at Nephis, knowing that Cassie won't see it. There was no one else on the stone platform, though, so it was pretty obvious who he was referring to.

"I'm also not someone to die easily. In fact, I'm willing to bet that you couldn't have found a better duo of Sleepers to escort you across the Dream Realm. If anyone can survive this, it's us. So, yeah. I think that our chances of making it back are pretty high."

Cassie suddenly giggled.

"Aren't you a little too full of yourself? You were in the second to last place!"

Sunny shrugged.

"That's only because someone smart told me to keep a low profile. Otherwise, I would have ranked higher."

Then, with a grin, he added:

"Much higher! Third to last, at least!"

The blind girl couldn't help but laugh. The melodic sound of her laughter made Sunny feel much better — he had not heard anything like that ever since coming to the Dream Realm. It was nice to see that people were still able to preserve a bit of mirth even in this hellish place.

Come to think of it, this was the first time he heard Cassie laugh at all. Back in the Academy, she was always dull and bleak.

After this sudden outburst, Cassia's expression slowly turned wistful. A few seconds later, she asked:

"What do you miss the most about home?"

Sunny tried to think of something, but failed. He wasn't sure that he even had a home in the real world — the tiny room he had been renting previously was nothing but a temporary shelter from the rain. As for the real world as a whole, his life there wasn't that pleasant either.

Finally, he said:

"I don't particularly miss anything."

Cassie was very surprised.

"Really? Don't you miss your family?"

Sunny smiled.

"I don't have a family. Well... I guess I have a sister somewhere. But we haven't seen each other in many years."

"Oh."

The blind girl fell silent. Several seconds later, she said quietly:

"I miss my family the most."

There was longing and sadness in her voice. Sunny didn't know what to say, so he stayed silent.

"Mom and dad must be really worried about me right now. No... no, actually, they wouldn't be worried. They would be heartbroken. They must think that I'm as well as dead already."

Sunny glanced at her and sighed.

"You seem to care about them a lot."

Cassie turned to him in confusion.

"Of course. Isn't it normal?"

Sunny stared at the grey sky. The wind smelled of rain.

After a while, he said:

"I wouldn't know."

In the evening, Nephis made Sunny perform the thousand strikes again. After that, they ate the last strips of dried scavenger meat and took turns sleeping, so that one of them could always keep an eye on Cassie.

Thankfully, nothing happened during the night.

When the morning came and the dark sea retreated, they prepared to leave the giant statue. Nephis was the first one to climb down. Before that, she had a few words to say:

"Today will be different from before. There will be much more scavengers roaming in the labyrinth. We might not be able to create an ambush or avoid fighting several of them at once."

She looked at Sunny:

"If anything happens, your job is to bring Cassie away. We can retreat by using passages that are too narrow for the scavengers. If we get separated, proceed to the high point by yourselves. Don't wait for me. Do you understand?"

With a somber expression, he gave her a nod. Nephis returned it.

"Good. Time is of the essence, so let's go."

With that, she began the descent. After Nephis reached a point twenty or so meters below them, she found purchase and waited. Using the golden rope,

Sunny lowered Cassie down. Just like while climbing up, they took turns helping the blind girl. Luckily, climbing down the statue was much easier.

Soon, they reached the ground.

Entering the labyrinth, the trio moved forward with haste. The shadow was ahead of them, scouting for monsters and optimal paths. Despite that, their progress was slow and chaotic. They had to constantly change direction to avoid groups of scavengers, often ending up in dead ends or moving further away from their destination.

Sunny, who played the role of the scout and navigator, felt his brains slowly starting to boil.

At some point, however, they inevitably ended up in a situation where a fight was unavoidable.

There was a large group of scavengers at their heels, and a pair of them blocking the path ahead. Neither of the two groups had noticed the Sleepers yet; however, since there were no other passages to turn into, it was only a matter of time.

Nephis considered their options for a few seconds. There was a scowl on her face. Finally, she said:

"If there's only two, we can take them."

Sunny looked at her with uncertainty in his eyes.

"But there's no time to set up an ambush."

He wasn't quite sure how they could fight two scavengers at once. Despite how good of a teacher Nephis was, he only practiced with the sword for a day. Facing against a scavenger alone was risky.

Changing Star shrugged.

"It's almost the same. I'll attack first. You follow behind in the shadows and finish one off once they turn. Then, we kill the second one together."

The whole plan was based on the assumption that Nephis could survive under the onslaught of two scavengers, both attacking her simultaneously. Sunny was very impressed by her prowess, but he wasn't sure that it was possible. There was a large probability that Nephis would die.

He still remembered that she wasn't present in Cassie's first vision.

But what else could they do?

A bit rattled, Sunny gritted his teeth.

"Alright."

After a short pause, Nephis summoned her sword.

Then, she stepped forward.

Chapter 46: Experience | Shadow Slave

After finding a good hiding spot for Cassie, Sunny and Nephis proceeded forward to face the scavengers. Soon, they saw two hulking silhouettes in the distance.

With her lips pursed together, Nephis threw over her shoulder:

"Keep up."

Then, like a runner preparing for a race, she got down on one knee, inhaled deeply... and lunged forward.

'Damn!'

Sunny dove into the deep shadow cast by the wall of the labyrinth and followed, running as fast as he could. However, the distance between them kept growing.

Suddenly, he remembered walking behind Nephis as they crossed the bridge to the Academy. Was it his fate to always follow behind her?

Changing Star's running speed was incredibly fast. She was practically flying through the air, like an arrow let loose from a bow. One of her arms was stretched backward, holding the sword with its point to the ground. The other was cutting the air with each stride.

It took the two scavengers a couple of seconds to realize what was happening after noticing her. By that time, she was almost upon them.

With madness burning in their eyes and viscous saliva dripping from their mandibles, the monsters screeched and charged forward. Nephis did not slow down, as though planning to ram them with her body. Sunny's heart skipped a bit.

Four terrifying pincers shot through the air.

At the last moment, Nephis fell backward, falling on her side. The inertia carried her forward as she slid through the mud, passing between the scavengers. Then, she twisted her body and stopped herself by plunging the sword into the ground.

A bit slower, and she would have been impaled by one of the scavengers' legs.

'Crazy! She's crazy!'

By the time Changing Star got back to her feet, one of the scavengers had already turned around. However, Sunny couldn't see what was going on as his sight was blocked by the bulky carapace creatures. He only heard the sound of chitin striking against steel.

There was no time to worry about that anyway, since he had his own problems to solve.

Due to the insane maneuver that Nephis had pulled off, the second scavenger lagged a little behind the first one. It was just about to turn around when Sunny finally got close enough to launch an attack.

Silently cursing, he ran up a narrow protrusion on the coral wall and jumped, aiming to pierce the weak point at the scavenger's back from above. His shadow was already wrapped around the Azure Blade.

But at the last moment, the scavenger suddenly moved, slightly turning its torso to the right. The blade missed the concave spot where the armor plates connected and instead hit one of them square in the center, sliding helplessly across adamantite chitin.

'Crap!'

Instead of killing the beast with one decisive blow, Sunny ended up dealing no damage at all. What's worse, he landed right on top of the scavenger, practically hugging it from behind. In the next moment, the scavenger shook its carapace, throwing the irritating human off.

Sunny flew sideways and crashed into the labyrinth wall, feeling breath being knocked out of him. Suffocating and disoriented, he fell gracelessly into the mud.

'Not good.'

By some instinct, Sunny rolled to the side. Something tore past him and hit the wall, sending pieces of crimson coral flying through the air. Then, he was lifted into the air and thrown backward.

But by that time, however, he had already come to his senses.

Twisting his body, Sunny managed to land on his feet and take a few steps back without falling. In the next second, his sword was in front of him, held in both hands just like Nephis had taught him.

The scavenger was already charging at him with a menacing fire burning in its eyes.

'Repetition. Experience...'

The shadow flowed from the Azure Blade to his hand, then spread to his arm, shoulder, and then finally covered his whole body. Sunny instantly felt stronger, faster, more resilient.

But was it enough? No. To survive, he would definitely also need some luck.

One pincer flew at him from the right, the other from the left. There was no time to retreat or dodge sideways. So, instead, Sunny did something that made every instinct in his body scream in protest.

He jumped forward, closing the distance to the charging monster. The pincers clashed together with a loud crack behind his back.

Instinct or not, it was the only logical step. After all, the attack range of his sword was much shorter than that of the scavenger. He could only fight back by getting close.

Before the beast had time to react, Sunny did what he had recently done thousands of times. His muscles moved even before his mind gave the command.

With one fluid motion, he raised the sword over his head and slashed downward, pushing with one hand while pulling with the other. His whole body moved in concert to deliver a powerful blow.

The Azure Blade whistled as it cut the air. Then, it hit the joint of one of the scavenger's front legs and cleaved right through it, severing the limb entirely. Blue blood sprayed everywhere.

Sunny had less than a second to be amazed.

'I actually did it?'

But there was no time to be distracted. Due to the loss of its front leg, the scavenger lost balance for a moment, careening forward and down. However, he had seven other legs. This wasn't going to last long.

Coincidentally, though, at this exact moment, his other front leg slid in the mud, bringing the monster even further down.

Sunny did not waste this chance.

Taking a step forward, he thrust the Azure Blade up, pushing it into the scavenger's mouth. A severed mandible fell to the ground as the monster impaled itself on the sword with its own weight.

The massive body of the Nightmare Creature convulsed before falling still.

It was dead.

Sunny slowly exhaled, only now feeling the pain in his chest and at the back of his head. He carefully touched it and grimaced. His hand came back wet with blood.

'At least I'm alive.'

[You have slain an awakened beast, Carapace Scavenger.]

[You shadow grows stronger.]

[You have...]

With no time to listen to the Spell, Sunny tugged on the sword to dislodge it from the monster's head and hurried to help Nephis.

However, it was too late.

The other scavenger was lying in the mud, clearly dead. His limbs were still twitching, indicating that the fatal blow was delivered just moments ago. It seemed like Nephis had managed to sever its spine by piercing the weak spot at the base of the beast's torso with her longsword.

He couldn't see the silver-haired girl behind the bulky carcass. As Sunny approached it, he heard the sound of rugged, strained breathing. Then a shaky voice came from behind the scavenger:

"D—don't... don't come any closer."

In the deathly silence of the battle's aftermath, Changing Star's voice sounded strange and subdued. Sunny suddenly felt as though someone had squeezed his heart in a fist. Steeling himself, he took another step forward.

Nephis was standing in front of the dead scavenger, trying to catch her breath after the intense fight. There was a bloody gash on her shoulder. However, it didn't look life-threatening.

Sunny's attention, though, was instantly drawn to something else.

It seemed that at some point during the fight, the tall girl's makeshift seaweed top came apart, leaving her naked above the waist. She was covering her chest with one arm. Behind the arm, squished, the supple fullness of her...

Sunny flinched as though someone had stung him and hurriedly turned around. His face was burning. Without thinking about it, he even made his

shadow look away.

An awkward silence followed. After some time, Sunny forced himself to speak:

"Are... are you alright?"

Nephis was slow to answer.

"Yes."

"Good. Uh... good. I'll... uh... I'll go fetch Cassie then."

"... Alright."

Feeling as though an army of monsters was chasing him, he walked forward on stiff legs and then quickened his step, barely holding himself from running.

'Her fault! It's her fault! She should have communicated things clearer!'

Trying to get the vivid image out of his head, Sunny hurried to the place where Cassie was waiting for them.

By the time they returned, Nephis had already fixed her top and was wearing it as though nothing had happened. However, Sunny couldn't help but feel that the look she gave him was somewhat weird.

'Forget it!'

After checking the wound on his head, Changing Star said.

"It's just a bleeder, nothing serious. Tell me if you feel dizzy and nauseous or have a strong headache, though."

Since Sunny had none of these symptoms, he kept quiet.

Nephis looked down at his clothes and sighed.

"Memory?"

He opened his mouth to say "no", but then fell silent.

Come to think of it, when he killed the scavenger, the Spell did say something else after informing him about the absorbed shadow fragments. At the time, he was too busy to pay it any attention.

"Let me check."

He summoned the runes and quickly found the cluster representing his Memories.

Memories: [Silver Bell], [Puppeteers' Shroud], [Azure Blade].

'Hmm. Nothing new.'

Then what was the Spell talking about?

Suddenly, he noticed a new set of runes in the neighboring cluster. His eyes widened.

Echoes: [Carapace Scavenger].

Chapter 47: Echo | Shadow Slave

'Echo... it's an Echo...'

Sunny couldn't believe his eyes.

Echoes were an extremely rare type of reward that Awakened could receive after slaying Nightmare Creatures. Chances of getting one were very low. In the real world, an Echo could be sold for an unimaginable amount of money. That's because they were much more precious than Memories.

Without delaying it much further, he dove into his Sea of Soul. There, very few things had changed: a lonely black sun was still hanging above the calm, silent waters. It was orbited by spheres of light that represented his Memories. This time, there were three of them.

Just like before, Sunny couldn't get rid of the feeling that something was stealthily moving just beyond the periphery of his vision. However, this time, he didn't pay it any attention. He wanted to see his Echo.

It, too, was represented by a sphere of light. However, this sphere was much larger and hovered further away from the Shadow Core. With a thought, he commanded it to descent.

The sphere slowly floated down and touched the dark water. As Sunny came closer, walking on the surface of the sea, its radiance slowly faded away, revealing the monster contained within.

A hulking, menacing carapace scavenger was calmly standing in front of him. There was no madness in its eyes... or any feeling at all, for that matter. After all, it wasn't really alive. It was just an echo.

Shining runes appeared in the air around the scavenger.

Echo: [Carapace Scavenger].

Echo Type: Beast.

Echo Core: Awakened.

Echo Attributes: [Strong], [Armored].

Echo Description: [A cursed soldier of the fallen legion].

Before Sunny knew it, a wide grin appeared on his face. That scavenger was now his: it could be summoned and used to fight against his enemies, carry heavy cargo or perform other tasks. What's more, it was a whole rank above its master, which meant that it was much stronger, more resilient and fearsome than a Dreamer with a dormant core should normally possess.

With this Echo by their side, many things would become easier.

Following an impulse, Sunny raised a hand and brushed it against cold, black chitin. He just wanted to touch his new possession...

However, the moment his palm touched the scavenger, a strange thing happened. The Soul of Sea suddenly surged a little, and a new set of runes appeared:

[Transform Echo into a Shadow?]

Sunny flinched and snatched his hand back.

'What the hell is that about?'

He had never heard anything about transforming Echoes into something else, let alone "Shadows". Then again, he had never heard about Shadow Cores and fragments, too.

'It seems my Aspect holds more secrets than I thought.'

Sunny licked his lips and hesitated. Then, he cautiously said:

"Yes."

However, nothing happened. A moment later, the runes changed:

[Not enough Shadow Fragments to perform a transformation.]

[Shadow Fragments required: 24/100.]

He frowned, disappointed.

'I see. So there is another use for the fragments. They can either enhance my own core or do something weird to Echoes. How do I know which use is more beneficial without knowing what a transformation actually does?'

An Echo was plenty useful by itself. Sunny felt that it would be wiser to concentrate on strengthening himself, at least for now.

'I'll experiment with it later.'

With that, he left the Sea of Soul.

Since he had spaced out for quite a bit, Nephis was looking at him with a silent question in her eyes.

Sunny grinned:

"I got an Echo."

Her pupils slightly widened.

Cassie, on the other hand, was more expressive:

"An Echo? You actually got an Echo?!"

"Yes."

Since the larger group of monsters was now minutes away from catching up with them, Sunny didn't waste any time and summoned the Scavenger.

The hulking beast immediately appeared in front of him, seemingly sewn together from tiny sparks of light. Soon, its black chitin became fully corporeal. Following Sunny's command, it shifted a little and raised its mighty pincers.

Nephis observed the Echo with an unreadable expression. Then, a corner of her lip slightly curled up.

"Good."

Sunny looked at her with a smile.

"I think we can task it with carrying Cassie. Outside of battle, it will help us the most."

The blind girl's mouth fell open.

"Carry me? Like... like a mount?"

He chuckled and slapped the scavenger on its carapace.

"This bad boy can fit a petite girl like you with no problem at all. Trust me! I've been clambering these things a lot for the past few days. It's actually quite spacious on top of them. Especially if they're not trying to kill you."

Cassie hesitated.

"Well... okay. If you think it's for the best."

Sunny and Nephis helped the blind girl to climb on top of the Echo. Then, they used the golden rope to create makeshift reins for Cassie to hold onto.

After quickly retrieving soul shards from the dead scavengers, the Sleepers hastily left the passage, narrowly avoiding another battle.

With Cassie riding comfortably atop the scavenger, their overall speed dramatically increased. Sunny and Nephis were jogging in the front, hoping to recoup the time lost in the first half of the day and reach the high point with an hour or two to spare.

From time to time, they had to take detours to avoid fighting groups of carapace monsters. However, with a monster of their own by their side, the

mood and mental state of the three Sleepers were much better.

For the first time since coming to this place, Sunny felt somewhat calm.

Of course, this calmness didn't last long.

At some point, he noticed that the wind had picked up a bit. Almost simultaneously, Cassie asked them to stop.

Nephis and Sunny looked at her with deep frowns. It seemed that they both had a bad premonition.

"What is it?"

The blind girl let go of the reins.

"Do you hear anything?"

They looked at each other, then shook their heads.

"No. Why?"

Cassie scowled.

"Help me get off this thing."

After they helped her, she stood motionless for a while, listening. Her scowl deepened. Then the blind girl cautiously kneeled and put her ear to the ground.

"What do you hear?"

Cassie licked her lips.

"It's murmuring."

Suddenly, a drop of water fell on Sunny's face. He raised his head and looked at the sky.

There, dark stormy clouds were gathering with unnatural speed. Pretty soon, they were bound to cover it completely.

Including the sun.

And when that happened...

His eyes widened.

Chapter 48: The Storm | Shadow Slave

"We need to move, now."

As Nephis turned to him, Sunny grabbed Cassie and helped her stand up. His face was even paler than usual, and there was a panicked look in his eyes.

"Now! Help me get her back on the scavenger!"

The silver-haired girl raised her head and looked at the sky. Soon, her expression darkened. Without saying anything, she did as he had asked.

Cassie seemed a bit disoriented. She grabbed the reins and helplessly turned to her friend:

"Neph? What is going on?"

Changing Star glanced at her. When she eventually spoke, her voice sounded heavy.

"A storm is coming."

Meanwhile, Sunny sent his shadow to climb on top of a tall pillar of coral and looked ahead, trying to understand how far the cliffs they were aiming for were. From the look of it, there was still a considerable distance to go. However, the giant statue was already much further away.

Going back now would have been suicide.

He turned to Nephis:

"We're about three or four kilometers away from the cliffs. Do... do you think we can make it?"

She scowled.

"If we take the most direct route. Maybe."

Sunny hesitated, then asked:

"What about the monsters?"

Changing Star looked ahead and gritted her teeth.

"We'll have to cut through."

'That's it? That's the plan?'

As he was fruitlessly trying to come up with some devious trick to save them, Nephis turned her head and glanced at him, puzzled.

"What are you waiting for? Run!"

As they darted forward, heavy drops of rain were starting to fall on the ground. Strong winds were howling between the coral blades, sending bits of mud and seaweed flying. With storm clouds gathering in the sky, sunlight dimmed, and a cold twilight descended upon the labyrinth.

Sunny was running with all his might, as though his life depended on it — because it actually did. He was leading their small group, choosing the straightest path toward the cliffs with the help of his shadow. Nephis was a step behind him. The scavenger carrying Cassie was stomping through the mud with its eight legs in the back.

Without the need to avoid monsters and death breathing down their necks, they moved with amazing speed. Side passages and crimson walls were flashing past them in a blur. There was no need to hold back and conserve strength for the long run — if they were late to reach the cliffs by a minute, their lives would be over. They had to give it their all.

Sunny was ready to fight a series of bloody skirmishes all along the way, but, to his surprise, the inhabitants of the labyrinth did not give them much trouble. The scavengers seemed to be as panicked as they were. The bulky

beasts were busy trying to hide inside the coral mounds or burrowing underground.

On the rare occasions when one of them showed aggression, a quick slash of the sword or a threatening clack of a pincer was enough to make the monster change its mind.

However, no matter how fast they were moving, the storm was faster. The rain quickly turned into a pelting downpour, each drop becoming a torrent. The winds grew in strength, striking against their bodies with enough force to make them stumble. The light dimmed even further, reducing visibility to almost zero.

Finally, a blinding bolt of lightning tore through the darkness, followed almost immediately by a deafening thunderclap.

In the next moment, the ground under Sunny's feet trembled, causing him to lose balance and fall. He rolled in the mud and tried to stand up, but slipped and fell again. Someone's arm grabbed him by the shoulder and helped him rise.

In the darkness of the storm, Sunny saw Changing Star's face. She opened her mouth and shouted:

"Don't stop! Run!"

He almost couldn't hear her behind the roaring wind and rain.

By the time Sunny began to move, the dark, salty water was already as high as his shins. He gritted his teeth.

The sea was coming back.

He couldn't determine where the water was coming from, but with each minute, it was rising higher. Soon, it was up to his knee, then up to his waist, making running almost impossible. The speed of the group slowed down considerably.

It was then, in a sudden flash of lightning, when they saw a dark mass of stone ahead.

They had made it to the cliffs.

Almost at the same time, a terrible rumbling sound came from the depths of the labyrinth. Turning back, Sunny saw a colossal, crushing torrent of black water rushing through the crimson forest. Some distance away, a tardy scavenger was caught by it and thrown against the coral walls. The unbreakable carapace of the mighty creature cracked and burst open like a rotten egg.

'Curses!'

He turned to Nephis:

"Time is up! Start climbing!"

She caught him by the arm.

"Dismiss your Echo!"

Sunny didn't know whether the scavenger could scale the cliff. In any case, Cassie wouldn't have been able to hold on if it did. He helped the blind girl get down and then sent the monster back to the Sea of Soul.

Nephis lowered herself to let Cassie climb on her back, then tied them together with the golden rope. Not wasting any time, she gritted her teeth and stepped forward to grab onto the wet rocks of the cliff wall.

They began the ascent, rushing to get as high as possible before the black torrent hit. Some time later, Sunny screamed:

"Brace!"

In the next moment, a wall of dark water hit the rocks mere meters beneath their feet. As Sunny held for dear life, the whole cliff shuddered. A few boulders fell from somewhere high above, missing his head only by chance.

Somehow, all three of them were still alive.

However, things were far from being over. The black water was still rising, now with frightening speed, threatening to swallow them at any second. They had to keep climbing, and they had to be faster than the surging sea.

Sunny cursed as he searched for the next hold to grab onto. To survive, he had to scale the face of the cliff with crazy speed. However, hastily climbing wet rocks was a recipe for disaster: one slip of a hand, and he would plunge down to be crushed against the cliffs, drown, or be eaten by some giant monster.

The torrential rain and hurricane wind made everything even worse.

And yet, there was no choice.

He frantically kept climbing, tearing his skin on sharp rocks. Every muscle in his body was in agony. If not for the shadow wrapped tightly around his body, Sunny would have been long dead. But even with its help, the surging dark water was getting closer and closer.

"Damn it! Damn it all!"

No matter how hard Sunny tried, he couldn't win back any distance. Soon, the water was at his feet. The sea slowly swallowed his legs, then his torso. He kept climbing, now fighting against the weight of the water and the force of the tide that was trying to tear him away from the cliff.

But it was useless in the end.

When the water covered his shoulders, he felt his finger slipping from the wet rocks. Sunny tried to hold on, but the current was too strong. He was pushed away like a weightless toy, losing any purchase...

'No!'

...In the last second, a golden rope fell into the water beside him. Shaken, Sunny grabbed onto it and held with all his strength. The rope drew tight and lifted him out of the water. His feet touched the cliff wall again.

Not wasting any time, he resumed climbing with the help of the rope. Finally, a strong hand grabbed him from above and dragged his body over the edge of the cliff.

Sunny fell to the ground, struggling to breathe. After some time, he looked at Nephis, who was lying in a similar position to his right, equally as drained. She was still clutching the golden rope in her hand. Cassie was sitting a few steps away from them.

He wanted to laugh, but had no strength for it.

They survived.

Chapter 49: Natural Element | Shadow Slave

For a few minutes, Sunny simply lay on the ground, letting the rain hit his face. From time to time, a bolt of lightning arced through the skies, drowning everything in blinding light. Other than that, it was almost completely dark. If not for his Attribute, he would have had trouble discerning the shapes of Nephis and Cassie, who were resting nearby.

After some time, however, a feeling of uneasiness entered his mind. Something was off. Sunny scowled, trying to understand where that feeling was coming from. Finally, he realized that it was his shadow. It was trying to draw his attention to something.

'Please, let me rest. I just want to rest.'

He was too tired to do anything. Both his body and mind were exhausted. However, the shadow was very persistent. It remained adamant.

In the end, Sunny moaned and rolled over on his stomach, then slowly stood up. Nephis turned her head and looked at him.

"What is it?"

He grimaced.

"I don't know yet. Something feels wrong."

Cassie shivered and got closer to Neph. Following his shadow's warning, Sunny looked around, trying to find any sign of danger in their surroundings.

Even with his vision, he couldn't see anything out of place. The upper part of the cliffs was well above the stormy sea, forming a small island. Its surface was rugged and uneven, with several protruding ridges breaking the line of sight. There was a large space between their group and the nearest ridge. That space was littered, seemingly at random, with piles of dirt and tall boulders.

Nephis got up and summoned her sword.

"Do you see anything?"

Sunny frowned.

"Not really..."

At that moment, another lightning flashed, briefly illuminating the small island. His eyes widened.

The tall boulders surrounding them were massive and irregularly shaped. They were black in color and motionless... that's why Sunny had not recognized them for what they were at first glance.

All around them, scavengers were silently lying on the ground.

Sunny froze, suddenly consumed by terror. The hairs on the back of his neck bristled and stood up on ends. One, two, three... he lost count because of panic and gritted his teeth. Seven... no, eight of them.

It seemed the three humans were not the only ones who thought of taking shelter from the dark sea on these cliffs. He trembled.

These cliffs were a death trap...

Noticing something on his face, Nephis tensed:

"Sunny?"

He slowly turned his head to her and whispered:

"Don't speak. Don't move. Just... stay where you are."

She followed his instructions without asking for the reason. However, a silent question appeared on her face.

Cassie did the same.

Sunny closed his eyes and breathed in, trying to calm his panicking mind down. There were no hopeless situations. Every problem had a solution. He just had to think of one...

The scavengers did not attack yet. Maybe they were asleep or patiently waiting out the storm, trying not to move in fear of attracting more terrifying monsters. Maybe they simply did not notice the humans. After all, it was unknown how well these creatures could see. Were they able to see in the dark? Probably not, or at least not as well as he could.

There was still hope.

Sunny opened his eyes and looked at the small island again. But this time, his perspective was different. He saw the deep darkness, the clamor of the storm that drowned out most of the sounds, the large distance between the scavenger.

This was his territory. It was perfectly suited for a murderous shadow. Didn't he dream of becoming a silent assassin? Well, here was his chance. He just had to execute each step perfectly... crawl through the darkness, strike without alerting the enemy, kill each of them with one precise blow.

Rinse and repeat. He already knew their strengths and weaknesses — all that was left was to put that knowledge to practice. And even if he makes a mistake, there were other means to fall back onto. Echo and Nephis could do their part if he were to land himself in danger.

Yes, that could work. It had to.

Sunny looked at Changing Star and Cassie.

"I'll take care of this."

Before they could react, he seemed to dissolve into the shadows.

Under the cover of darkness, Sunny sneaked forward. His steps were soft and measured, his breathing controlled. He quickly determined the optimal order of attack to minimize the chance of being discovered and proceeded

to the first target — a hulking scavenger that was the furthest away from the pack.

Hidden in the shadows, Sunny suddenly felt calm and focused. He felt as though he was finally in his natural element.

As the looming silhouette of the scavenger approached, he slowed down and circled around his target. The monster did not move, oblivious to the lurking threat that was drawing closer with each second. Sunny held his breath and prepared to attack.

He only had one chance.

'Do it right!'

With that thought, he silently lunged forward.

One step, two. Sunny jumped and easily landed on the monster's carapace. The Azure Blade was already in his hand, its steel dark. A moment later, it plunged into the weak point on the scavenger's back, piercing the chitin and destroying its brain. The quiet crack of the breaking carapace was quickly washed away by the rain.

It was done.

Sunny felt a sense of triumph appear in his heart and quickly suppressed it. This wasn't the right time to celebrate — seven targets were still waiting for him in the darkness.

He retrieved his sword and jumped down from the scavenger's corpse.

Then, Sunny frowned.

Why was the Spell silent?

It didn't announce his kill, nor the absorption of the shadow fragments.

Feeling his skin crawl, Sunny turned around and looked at the scavenger. At first, he was afraid that the beast was still alive... but that wasn't the case.

It was as dead as could be.

However, on closer inspection, Sunny noticed something that he had missed before.

And when he did, his face paled.

Chapter 50: Death Trap | Shadow Slave

The scavenger was dead. However, it wasn't Sunny's blade that killed it.

While circling the target, he was focused on staying unnoticed and not alerting the enemy to his presence before reaching the optimal position for an attack. After that, he only saw the monster's back.

That's why he didn't notice the terrible wound that ran from the top of the creature's torso to its segmented legs, obscured by the rain.

The unbreakable carapace was cut open like a tin can. The scavenger's flesh and mangled organs could be easily seen through the large gap, oozing azure blood. It streamed down only to be washed away by the storm.

Sunny gulped.

He might have felt awkward about performing a perfect ambush on a long-dead monster if not for the fear of whatever had killed it in the first place.

Looking around, he hesitated and summoned the Azure Blade back, then wrapped himself in the shadow.

The small island was silent except for the howling of the wind. The rain was still falling down, forming a constant veil that hid away all details and distant objects. A rare flash of lightning sometimes flooded this bleak world with stark whiteness. Then, a thunderclap would come, making the skies tremble.

With cold fright settling deep into his bones, Sunny cautiously moved to the next scavenger. He could tell from some distance that it was also dead, but had to come closer and make sure. Indeed, he was right: the creature was almost severed in half by the unknown assailant. Its wet innards were lying on the ground in a messy pile.

The darkness had long ago stopped being comforting, becoming terrifying and oppressive instead. Sunny shivered.

...By the time he checked on all eight monsters and confirmed that they were all dead, he was nauseous and scared out of his wits. When Sunny had first realized that the black shapes were, in fact, scavengers, he thought that the situation was as bad as it could get. Now, he wasn't sure anymore.

In fact, he was pretty convinced that things went from bad to worse.

Standing near the last scavenger, Sunny observed his surroundings and thought about returning to Neph and Cassie. Maybe the terrifying killer had already left the island. They could just hide and hope for the best. He wouldn't be alone, at least.

However, not knowing what kind of danger was hiding in the darkness would drive him insane long before the morning came. Plus, with his Fated attribute, "hoping for the best" was a fool's errand.

That's why, although his body was covered in cold sweat, Sunny gritted his teeth and slowly walked toward the ridge that was obscuring the rest of the island from him. Coming close, he started climbing, trying to be as quiet as possible.

The ridge wasn't very high, so he was able to scale it without much effort. Sticking close to the rocks, he raised his head and looked down.

Then, he immediately wanted to let go and fall to the ground.

Right beneath him, just a few meters away, a dark silhouette was outlined against the rocks. It was much larger than the scavengers, with jagged spikes growing out of its thick carapace. Its chitin was black and crimson, like an ancient armor splattered with fresh blood. Instead of pincers, two terrifying bone scythes were protruding from the joints of its arms.

Each one was long and sharp enough to split a scavenger in two.

Sunny froze, afraid to move. He even stopped breathing.

'So that's the killer.'

It was one of those monsters that they had seen retrieving the transcendent soul shards from the giant shark's carcass, or another of their kind. He remembered how the two creatures had cut through the horde of scavengers, killing or throwing aside any beast that got in their way. Slaughtering just seven of them would not pose a problem for something that deadly.

Not to mention getting rid of three Sleepers.

Careful not to make a sound, Sunny slowly lowered himself down. His whole body was trembling. Moving his arms and legs with utmost precision, he began climbing down from the ridge, praying not to be heard, sensed, or noticed in some other way.

Luckily, the monster remained oblivious to his presence.

Reaching the ground, Sunny took a few steps back, still facing the ridge. He had to force himself to turn around. Feeling as though his back was being pierced by invisible needles, the young man stealthily moved in the direction where he had left his companions.

A couple of minutes later, he returned to Nephis and Cassie. The girls were tense and nervous, waiting for his return in the darkness. Before coming out of the shadows, Sunny let them know that he was approaching.

"It's me."

Nephis moved, lowering her sword a little. Her face was a little grim.

"What is the situation?" she said, careful to keep her voice low.

Sunny slowly exhaled, finally feeling a bit safer. For the first time, he was genuinely happy not to be alone in this cursed place.

"There are eight scavengers around us. But they're all dead. The killer is one of those big monsters we saw, the thing with the crimson pattern on its carapace and scythes instead of pincers. It's hiding from the storm beneath a stone ridge not far from here."

A bolt of lightning flashed, illuminating everything around. In its aftermath, it looked as though two white sparks ignited in Changing Star's eyes. Soon, the reflection was gone, leaving them grey and inscrutable again.

She tilted her head and whispered, as though talking to herself.

"An awakened monster."

Sunny licked his lips.

"Yeah. So, what should we do?"

Nephis thought for a while, leaning on her sword. Then, she looked at him and said:

"Kill it."

Sunny stared at her, lost for words. Finally, he collected himself and said the first thing that came to his mind...

"Are you nuts?"

The idea of fighting that thing was pretty ridiculous, if not completely insane. Realizing that his words might have sounded a bit rude, he cleared his throat and added:

"I mean... have you thought this through? How are we supposed to kill that monstrosity?"

Nephis slowly inhaled.

"It's not a question of thinking things through. We simply have no choice."

She glanced at Cassie, who was listening to them with a pale face, and explained:

"We can't leave the cliffs before morning, and neither can the monster. However, once the sun rises, it will easily see us and attack. Then, our only advantage — the element of surprise — will be gone. If we have to fight it anyway, it's better to be the ones initiating the fight."

Changing Star looked around and added:

"It's not completely dark yet. Although barely, I can still see. Once the night comes, this won't be the case. So we will have to attack it first, and do it soon."

Sunny shook his head.

"This still doesn't explain how we are going to kill it. That thing just dispatched eight scavengers like it was nothing. We are not its opponents. We don't even know its weaknesses!"

Nephis frowned. After a short pause, she said:

"It's just an awakened monster."

Sunny couldn't help but stare at her in disbelief.

"What do you mean, "just" an awakened monster? Have you forgotten that all three of us are only Sleepers?! Dormant humans are not supposed to be able to deal with awakened beasts, let alone monsters. The fact that we can reliably kill scavengers is already abnormal!"

She looked back at him, undisturbed, and simply answered:

"But we are abnormal."

Sunny stood there with his mouth open, not knowing what to say.

Nephis sighed.

"You and I both are not exactly ordinary Sleepers. Aren't we? Don't try and deny it. Someone ordinary simply would not have survived in this place."

He frowned, not happy about her line of thought. Meanwhile, Changing Star continued:

"You, me, plus the awakened beast you have as an Echo, plus the advantage of a surprise attack. I'm not saying that it will be easy. We might die. But there's a good chance that we won't."

She looked down, at the silvery blade of her sword, and added after a couple of seconds:

"In any case. As I have already said, we don't have a choice."

Sunny gritted his teeth, trying to find a logical retort. However, her reasoning seemed unassailable. He just had a really bad feeling about fighting that monster.

In the ensued silence, Cassie, who had been quiet all this time, suddenly spoke:

"You are forgetting about the main advantage we have over that thing."

Both of them looked at her, surprised.

The blind girl turned to face them and slightly lifted her head.

"We are intelligent, and the monster is not."

Her words echoed in the darkness. Sunny sighed.

It seemed that a fight with the bone scythe monster was inevitable.

Some time later, he was standing in the darkness, looking at the terrifying creature in front of him. His expression was grim and somber. Tightly gripping the Azure Blade, Sunny slowly inhaled.

The ominous feeling he had before was still there, now stronger than ever.

'I don't like this.'

With this thought, he exhaled and raised his hand.

Chapter 51: Carapace Centurion | Shadow Slave

Monsters did possess some rudimentary intelligence, however, they could not compare to humans. At their core, they were still predators who acted mostly on instinct. Their cunning was beastly in nature and was not that hard to overcome. That gave the three Sleepers a chance to leverage their advantage.

After finalizing the plan, they made some preparations.

While Changing Star was getting ready, Sunny had retrieved the soul shards from the eight dead scavengers. After delivering them to the silver-haired girl, he watched as she brought them to her chest and crushed them in her fist one after another, absorbing the essence of each shard into her soul core. After a few minutes, when the changes caused by the absorption were over, Nephis opened her eyes and slowly inhaled.

To a Sleeper, consuming the shards of eight awakened beasts was equivalent to slaying sixteen dormant creatures. While not tremendous, it was still a significant boost in physical ability. Her body had become stronger, faster, enhanced in every way.

They were going to need every bit of that strength to survive.

Because of how attuned Nephis was to her physicality, getting accustomed to her new limits did not take long. Very soon, she looked at him and asked:

"Are you ready?"

Sunny sighed glanced at his shadow, hoping to get some moral support.

The shadow pretended to not notice and ignored him.

'Disloyal bastard!'

"As ready as I'll ever be."

Nephis nodded and turned to Cassie.

There was nothing really to say. They had already discussed everything there was to discuss, and empty words could not make the blind girl worry any less. Come to think of it, Sunny wouldn't have wanted to trade places with her, even though out of the three of them she was the only one who didn't have to risk her life in combat.

Facing the enemy, no matter how terrifying, was better than waiting powerlessly for the outcome, knowing that there's nothing you can do to change it. From that point of view, he was actually the lucky one.

Cassie tried to put on a brave face. She turned to Nephis and forced a smile:

"Go and kill that thing. Maybe you'll finally get something decent to wear and stop making me feel so guilty."

A corner of Changing Star's lip curled up.

"Okay."

After that, she turned to Sunny and returned to her usual serious self.

"Let's go."

... A few minutes later, he was standing on top of the rocky ridge, looking down at the deadly monster. The shadow was wrapped around his body, enhancing Sunny's physical abilities. Their plan was pretty solid and had a high chance of working.

However, he still couldn't get rid of the ominous feeling that this was not going to end well.

'I don't like this.'

With a sigh, Sunny raised his hand and summoned the silver bell.

Then, he lightly shook it, causing the clear melodic ringing to resound amidst the storm.

Immediately, the monster below moved, turning its massive torso around and looking for the source of the sudden noise. As he saw Sunny, a mad crimson flame ignited in its eyes.

However, Sunny did not see any of this, because he was already facing the other way. As soon as the bell rang, he turned around and jumped down from the ridge without a second of hesitation.

The ridge wasn't very tall, but there was still a considerable distance to the ground. Sunny hit the rocks hard and rolled, trying to disperse the force of the impact. As soon as he got back to his feet, he ran, trying to get as far away as possible.

A moment later, the ridge exploded behind his back. The monster simply crashed into it with its hulking body, breaking through the layers of rocks as though they were paper. Simultaneously, there was a flash of lightning and a thunderclap, drowning the loud rumble of the falling debris.

The creature locked onto retreating Sunny and lunged forward, trying to pierce his body with one of its scythes. Shards of rock were flowing like a torrent from its spiked carapace.

Luckily, Sunny was already far enough. Without slowing down, he lowered his body, ran for several more meters, and then turned around.

The picture of the monster, who was more than three meters tall, rushing at him like a speeding train was enough to make any person falter. However, Sunny stood his ground, raising the Azure Blade above his head.

After all, he was the bait.

Half a dozen meters away from him, the monster finally reached their trap.

Almost unnoticeable in the darkness and the pouring rain, the golden rope was strung between two massive boulders at the height of the creature's leg joints. Earlier, Sunny had lowered his body to run beneath it.

Overwhelmed by bloodlust, the monster did not notice the tautly drawn rope and ran into it at full speed. If it was a normal rope, it would, without a doubt, immediately snap. However, the golden rope was a Memory, and being incredibly sturdy was one of its attributes.

The rocks it was tied to, unfortunately, were quite mundane. They shattered almost immediately.

But the damage was already done.

With its front legs suddenly jerked backward, the scythe slayer lost its balance and crashed into the ground face-first, sliding forward on wet stone and leaving behind a shallow trench. Sunny jumped away.

The monster was unperturbed. Almost immediately, two bone scythes pierced the ground, jerking its massive body to a stop. In the next moment, unexpectedly swift and nimble for its size, it was already beginning to rise.

If it was allowed to stand up, their fates would be sealed.

Fortunately, Sunny's Echo was faster.

The moment the monster fell, it stopped pretending to be one of the dead scavengers, got up and dashed forward. Just as their enemy was about to rise, it jumped on its carapace from behind, pinning the creature down with its weight, and locked its pincers on the creature's arms just beneath the point where the bone scythes began.

Despite the fact that the Echo was wounded by the spikes growing from the monster's carapace, it succeeded in immobilizing it, at least for a second.

A second was enough.

As though out of nowhere, Nephis, who was lying in ambush, appeared in front of the monster. Darting between its terrifying scythes, she leaned forward and delivered a devastating thrust with her longsword, putting her whole weight behind it.

They didn't know if the awakened monster had the same weak spot on its back as its lesser relatives, the scavengers, had. However, there was no reason to assume that there was no gap between its carapace and torso armor. It was a mechanical issue.

Anything that had to be flexible could not be too rigid.

The tip of Changing Star's sword plunged into the narrow gap. Then, the sword disappeared into the monster's body, penetrating so deep that its hilt ended up brushing against the chitin.

'Hell yes!' Sunny thought, triumphant.

However, in the next second, his expression dimmed.

Because the creature didn't even seem to notice the wound that was supposed to be if not fatal, then at least heavily debilitating. Straining its body a little, it suddenly twisted, throwing the Echo off its carapace, and rose to its feet. The bone scythes scraped against the rock as it pulled them out from the ground.

Defenseless, Nephis was right in front of it, her sword still stuck in the monster's flesh.

'Oh no!'

Sunny was too far away to do anything, circling around the massive creature to attack it from behind. The Echo was on the ground, still reeling from being thrown off the enemy's back. It didn't seem like it could help either.

For the moment, Changing Star was on her own.

The scythes pierced the air, aiming for her flesh. At the last moment, however, a pair of pincers locked one of them into an iron grip. That gave Nephis another fraction of a second to react.

Letting go of the sword, she dove under the creature's body, hiding in the blind spot of the remaining scythe's attack range. As far as hiding places

went, this one wasn't optimal, since all the monster had to do to crush her into a bloody pulp was to lie down. However, in that moment, Nephis had no other choice.

'This is bad, this bad...'

By then, Sunny was already behind the creature. Hoping to buy Neph some time, he brandished the Azure Blade and slashed down. The sword connected with the joint of one of the monster's rear legs, drawing azure blood. However, unlike how it was in the battle against a scavenger, he failed to completely sever the limb. It was too tough and thick.

In the next moment, the leg disappeared from Sunny's field of vision.

'Crap.'

As that thought appeared in his mind, Sunny raised his head and looked at the monster. Somehow, it had already turned around and was now facing him, two crimson flames burning with bloodlust in its eyes.

Before Sunny could properly react, the sharp tip of a bone scythe hit him in the chest with the force of a siege ram. The only thing he managed to do was to transfer the shadow from his body to the Puppeteer's Shroud.

Because of this lightning-fast decision, the armor held. He wasn't pierced through the heart and impaled on the scythe.

However, it was a small consolation.

The force of the blow was still enough to make his ribcage cave in and send his body flying through the air like a rag doll.

... Somehow, Sunny found himself lying on the ground. His body felt weird, and he couldn't breathe. Something bitter was flowing from his mouth, making him choke.

It was blood. He was drowning in his own blood.

Weakly, Sunny tried to move, but his limbs wouldn't listen to him. Only the shadow listened, enveloping his body and delaying the inevitable a little.

'I'm hurt...'

With his thoughts moving slower and slower, as though submerged in a dense fog, he looked up, hoping to see the stars.

Instead, he saw two burning crimson eyes approaching him from the darkness.

Chapter 52: Clarity | Shadow Slave

In that moment, hovering on the edge of nothingness, Sunny realized that he was about to die.

He had to struggle against the fog that permeated his mind, slowing down his thoughts and dampening all emotions.

All except for fear.

Despite the fact that his body was broken and his mind was paralyzed, some stubborn part of Sunny was still refusing to give up. He wasn't ready to die. At least not without giving his all to survive.

He was revolted at the thought of giving the world the satisfaction of the win.

That would be so infuriating. Hadn't he told Hero that he was going to survive no matter what, to spite them all?

That's right. He might be a shameless liar, but a promise was still a promise.

But... how was he even supposed to survive? No matter how he looked at it, the situation seemed to be hopeless.

As the scythe slayer approached, its eyes shining menacingly with bloodthirsty crimson light, Sunny tried to pierce through the fog that enveloped his mind. However, his attempts were aimless and weak. It was hard to find purchase in the fog.

He needed an anchor.

Suddenly, a simple thought caught his attention. It was something that he had repeated a thousand times, burning it into his mind.

'Repetition, experience, clarity.'

Clarity...

He remembered what Nephis had taught him. The essence of combat was murder. Any action performed during a battle served only one of two purposes: it was either to kill your enemy or prevent the enemy from killing you.

If he could learn that, he would have enough clarity to master the mind.

Back then, he didn't really understand the profound meaning behind the simple word "clarity" that Nephis had used. But now, with his mind in shambles, he was finally able to grasp it.

The two truths behind the essence and purpose of combat were simple and solid, almost tangible. Even in his half-conscious state, he was able to use them as a stable foundation in the fog. Then, he reformed his mind around this foundation, building it along the stark lines of that truth.

Suddenly, he was able to think again.

What's more, his thoughts were clear and incredibly fast, free of all unnecessary distractions.

This was clarity.

Sunny looked up at the advancing monster, calmly weighing his options.

His body was pretty much useless. He couldn't move his limbs at all. The shadow still followed his commands, but it was busy doing an important job — keeping him from dying immediately.

Even with its help, he wouldn't be able to last long.

But this was a useless thought. He couldn't do anything about it, so there was no sense in wasting time considering it further.

With his body immobilized, Memories couldn't be used.

That left only the Echo.

The carapace scavenger was going to have to be his only tool to either kill the enemy or prevent the enemy from killing him.

The monster was quickly approaching Sunny. Its mandibles moved, viscous saliva flowing down from them in a torrent of transparent mucus. In a flash of lightning, he was able to see and instantly register every spike, every scratch, every abrasion on the creature's carapace.

The handle of Changing Star's sword was still protruding from its body, washed in azure blood.

'What an ugly bastard.'

Sunny was being hypocritical. Truth be told, with its black carapace painted with crimson patterns and a mighty body specially designed for mayhem and slaughter, the scythe slayer looked striking and incredibly menacing.

It was almost majestic... in a terrifying, murderous kind of way.

Unable to move, he had to look helplessly as the monster closed the distance between them and loomed over Sunny's broken, bleeding body.

Its scythes rose into the air, ready to strike down.

Looking right into the monster's burning eyes, Sunny thought:

'Go to hell, you overgrown bug!'

The scythes shot toward his body.

...In the last moment, something massive and furious rammed into the monster from the side, throwing it away. It was Sunny's carapace scavenger.

Not bothering with its own safety anymore, the Echo entwined itself with the enemy in a chaotic mess of limbs as they rolled on the ground. Despite the fact that it was smaller and weaker, its crazy assault and complete

disregard for its own life were enough to give the bigger monster some pause.

The Echo lashed out with its pincers, ramming them against the creature's carapace in a crazy whirlwind of blows. For a moment, the howling of the wind was drowned out by the clamor of chitin striking against chitin. The slayer's carapace mostly held, but a couple of cracks did appear on its black surface.

However, it was still superior to the scavenger in every way. Even with one of its scythes pinned awkwardly under its body, the monster was more than able to repel the sudden attack. With an angry screech, it sliced with the other scythe, cutting one of the scavenger's pincer arms clean off. Then, it strained its legs and threw the smaller creature away.

In the process, the rear leg that was already wounded by Sunny broke off, but the monster didn't pay it any attention.

Burning with madness and fury, it untangled its limbs and slowly stood up. Another deafening screech resounded in the howling darkness of the storm, hurting Sunny's ears.

'Now what?' he thought, momentarily lost for ideas.

But then, something very unexpected happened.

As the slayer moved to finish off the Echo, it had to slightly raise and lean its torso back to account for the loss of a rear leg and keep its balance. At that moment, a bolt of lightning landed right in the middle of the small island.

With how tall the monster was, the lightning was immediately attracted to the handle of the sword that was still sticking from its body, aimed at the sky at a slight angle. At that moment, Changing Star's longsword suddenly became a lightning rod.

Instantly, hundreds of millions of volts of electricity coursed through the slayer's body.

In a blinding flash of light, it was thrown to the ground. Whisps of smoke rose from the cracks in its carapace.

In a strange turn of events, arcs of residual electricity danced on the monster's chitin, slowly accumulating on the crimson patterns on it. Under that influence, the crimson pattern changed its color, becoming white and incandescent.

Sunny stared at all this in bewilderment.

'It's... glowing?'

For a second, he hoped that the monster was dead. But no, a single strike of lightning was not enough to kill a creature like that. Just a few moments after being electrocuted, the slayer moved, slightly shaking its body.

Although it was in a rather bad shape, it was still alive and full of murderous intent.

Looking somewhat dazed, the monster gathered its limbs and tried to stand up. Slowly but surely, it was coming back to its senses. The bone scythes scraped against the rocks, helping it rise.

However, before it did, Nephis was suddenly right in front of it.

Grabbing the hilt of the longsword, she grimaced as the heat burned her hands. Then, she twisted the blade, making the slayer's body twitch, and pulled it out, breaking apart a large portion of its lower torso armor.

The monster tried to slash at her with a scythe, but Changing Star was quicker. Dashing to the side, she simultaneously lashed out with her sword. The glowing, white-hot blade caught the creature's arm right below the joint and cleaved through it, sending the terrifying bone scythe flying through the air in a rain of azure blood.

The slayer screeched and swatted her away with one of its legs. Nephis was thrown back and rolled on the rocks, losing her grip on the sword. Her eyes momentarily lost focus.

The monster, on the contrary, was back to its sense. It seemed as though the sudden pain of losing a limb had shaken it wide awake. Raising to its full height, it opened its ugly mouth and let out a deafening, enraged shriek.

Then, it lunged toward Neph with all-consuming hatred burning in its eyes.

But it didn't get far.

Right as the livid monster was beginning its attack, the battered Echo appeared in its path. Its one remaining pincer shot forward, plunging into the wide gap in the armor created by Changing Star's sword. Twisting its arm, the scavenger pushed it inside the enemy's body, wreaking havoc on its innards.

In the end, it even lifted the whole monster in the air a little, its pincer going in almost up to the shoulder.

The slayer lashed out with its scythe, piercing the Echo's chest through.

Then, it twitched a couple of times and fell still.

The scavenger screeched angrily and jerked its pincer, tearing the bigger monster's torso clean off its carapace. Proudly giving the eviscerated enemy one last look, it then staggered and collapsed to the ground.

Sunny tiredly dismissed the Echo, hoping that it can survive.

He wasn't feeling too well.

In fact, he was pretty much done for.

[You have slain an awakened monster, Carapace Centurion.]

The Spell's voice fell uselessly on his deaf ears. It sounded distorted and distant.

[You have received a Memory: Starlight Legion Armor.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

'I won.'

Sunny closed his eyes, finally allowing pain and exhaustion to flood his mind.

The fog was back, making everything feel like it was happening to someone else.

He was tired.

And he couldn't breathe.

Drowning in blood was not very pleasant.

As his conscience begin to slip, he heard the sound of someone's hurried steps.

And then, two soft hands gently touched his face...

Chapter 53: Immortal Flame | Shadow Slave

Somewhat surprised, Sunny struggled to open his eyes. As his vision slowly focused, he saw Neph's pale face looming above him. Her short silver hair was wet, sticking close to her skin.

She was standing on her knees beside his broken body, caressing his face with her hands. In her eyes, there was a strange expression.

It was as though she was frightened, but resigned to something.

Her pupils were wide and dark.

'Wh—what?'

Greeting her teeth, Nephis moved her hands to his collapsed chest and pressed them lightly against it, causing a pulse of pain to radiate through Sunny's body.

Then, a soft, radiant brilliance suddenly ignited beneath the skin of her palms, reflecting in her grey eyes like two dancing white sparks.

Almost immediately, Changing Star's face contorted in a grimace of excruciating agony, and she let out a terrible, muffled scream.

Her skin became white as a sheet of paper, and as she bit her lower lip, drops of blood soon rolled to her chin.

As the radiance grew in intensity, Nephis shut her eyes tightly, tears streaming down her tortured, bloodless face.

Sunny, on the contrary, felt like he was in heaven. All pain disappeared from his body, replaced by gentle, all-encompassing warmth. He felt as though he was being cleansed by something pure and sacred.

By a white, pristine, purifying flame.

Under the influence of the flame, his dying body began to repair itself. His shattered bones were reassembled from the shards. His torn flesh regenerated and became whole again. His collapsed lungs and damaged heart were brought back to life and rejuvenated, instantly turning strong and healthy.

Suddenly, he could breathe again.

As his chest moved, drawing in a new breath, Nephis flinched away with a harrowing moan. The white radiance beneath her skin dimmed and disappeared, letting the darkness return to its rightful place.

Crawling away a few steps, Changing Star stopped, standing on her knees and hands, and violently vomited. Her whole body was shivering uncontrollably, as though on the verge of a seizure.

As the shivers died down, she slowly lowered herself to the ground and lay there motionlessly, catching the raindrops with her mouth.

Sunny, meanwhile, raised his hands and carefully explored his body.

To his surprise, nothing really hurt. It was as though he was never wounded in the first place, let alone almost died.

With the help of Nephis and her mysterious Aspect Ability, he was completely healed.

It was a miracle.

By the time the storm was over, it was already deep into the night. Sunny, Nephis and Cassie huddled together for warmth and slept as though they were dead, too tired to make someone keep watch.

If anything were to happen, the shadow would probably alarm them in advance.

If not, so be it. They were just too exhausted to care.

Luckily, the rest of the night went without incidents.

In the morning, no one was in a hurry to make any plans or suggest leaving the cliffs. They just gathered some meat from the dead carapace centurion and the scavengers, collected the two soul shards and moved to the opposite side of the small island, afraid that the remains would attract some creature's attention.

As it turned out, they were right. Not long after the group left the place of the battle, a dark spot appeared in the sky. Soon, it became larger and approached the cliffs, landing near the corpse of the centurion in a whirlwind.

Sunny had never seen anything like it. The creature was massive in size, easily weighing twice as much as the carapace monster. Its body was white as a corpse and muscular, like that of a lion. It had two mighty paws in the back and six in the front, protruding messily out of its wide chest. Each ended with long, sharp talons.

The neck of the flying monstrosity was covered in long black feathers, as well as its enormous wings. Its head resembled that of a raven, with large round eyes and a terrifying black beak.

While they hid behind rocks, the creature feasted on the dead centurion, easily breaking its carapace apart with its talons and beak. Then, satisfied, it grabbed a few scavenger carcasses with its paws and rose back into the air, creating a small hurricane with each flap of its black wings.

The creature left the cliffs and flew back the way it came.

It was moving west.

Following the black dot as it disappeared into the distance, Sunny sighed.

"Neph. What do you think that thing is?"

Nephis was also looking at the sky. After a few seconds, she lowered her gaze.

"I have no idea."

Sunny simply nodded and went about his business. He still had to perform his thousand strikes.

After making a fire, they roasted the centurion's meat and had a delicious, hefty breakfast. Then, stuffed, the three of them lied down and lazily rested.

After fighting against two scavengers at once, running away and barely surviving the sudden flood, climbing tall cliffs in the middle of a storm and battling an awakened monster — all done in a single day — they deserved some time off.

Plus, Sunny needed to sort himself out. Truth be told, he was feeling a bit strange.

The reason for this was not his traumatic near-death experience, although it had a lot to do with it. The thing was that, after the unexpected epiphany he had while trying to fight against the deathly mind fog, Sunny felt as though he had been changed.

Because the clarity he gained never went away.

It was still here, at the center of his being. He felt as though his very way of thinking and perceiving the world was now completely different. It was stark, streamlined and dauntless.

Sunny felt that he had become calmer. He was now able to think much faster and act without hesitation. Many things that previously seemed obscure and frightening suddenly became predictable, and thus surmountable.

It was as though he had discovered an underlying order to the world that wasn't there before. That inner understanding gave him an advantage that was hard to explain with words.

In a sense, this change was even more profound than the transformation of his body at the end of the First Nightmare. He felt that he had made a big

leap in his combat ability and overall power, even though it wasn't tied to the number of consumed shadow fragments or unlocked Aspect Abilities.

Looking at the sky, Sunny wondered if this was how Nephis always felt.

'Probably. Mastery of the body, mastery of the mind. Right?'

He was still far away from being a master. But it felt as though he was on the right track.

Some time later, Sunny approached the western edge of the cliffs.

Nephis was sitting there, her feet dangling over the edge. She was looking west, lost in her thoughts.

He sat down beside the silver-haired girl and followed her gaze, trying to guess what she was thinking about.

Just like always, he failed. Changing Star was hard to understand.

Sunny shifted, feeling incredibly embarrassed. Finally, he gathered his courage and said:

"You saved my life twice yesterday."

Nephis glanced at him and turned away again.

"I did."

He hesitated, trying to find the correct words. In the end, he couldn't come up with anything and simply said:

"Thank you."

This time, she looked at him a bit longer. Her face was calm and indifferent.

"There's no need to thank me. Without you and your shadow, we would have drowned before reaching the cliffs or been torn apart by a large group of scavengers after stumbling on them in the labyrinth."

After that uncharacteristically long sentence, she fell silent and added after a while:

"We're allies."

Sunny nodded, knowing that she was right. Still, Nephis went above and beyond to keep him alive. Even if he had also done his part, not everyone would have gone to such lengths to return the favor.

However, he didn't say anything about it. Mostly because he could already imagine her answer.

Staring right at him, she would stay quiet for some time and then say something like "I just wanted to" or "It is what it is" in a flat tone. And then there would be an awkward silence.

With a subtle smile, Sunny looked away.

A minute or two later, he said:

"It's you Flaw, isn't it? The pain you feel every time you use your Ability?"

Nephis was silent for a while before answering. Then, she simply said:

"Yes."

Sunny looked at her. Changing Star's profile was calm and distant. The wind was playing with her short silver hair.

"What does it feel like?"

She was staring into the distance.

"Like burning alive."

He sighed, trying to imagine what kind of suffering someone being burned alive would have to endure. As always, the Spell was vile and cruel.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly after some time.

Nephis shrugged, not turning her head.

"It's just pain."

Sunny looked away, trying to hide his expression.

'Just pain.'

These might have been the saddest words he had ever heard.

Chapter 54: Spoils Of War

For a long while, they just sat quietly together. Nephis was looking at the horizon, thinking about something only she knew about. Sunny's mind was strangely empty.

From time to time, he would cast a glance inside his Soul Sea, observing the recuperating Echo. The scavenger managed to survive its fight against the Carapace Centurion, even if it was just barely. Now, enveloped in a cocoon of light, it was flowing in the calming darkness of Sunny's soul and slowly regenerating.

If an Echo managed to retreat into the Sea of Soul alive, it would eventually recover from any wounds. The holes on the scavenger's carapace were already beginning to close. Its lost pincer arm, however, was not growing back any time soon.

Sunny sighed and summoned the runes. He decided to go over the spoils of the harrowing battle.

Shadow Fragments: [28/1000].

Since it was his Echo that delivered the final blow, the kill was considered to be his. Thus, he received four shadow fragments, two for each of the Centurion's awakened cores. The shards of the cores themselves went to Nephis as per their agreement. She decided to consume one herself and give the other one to Cassie.

The reward was sizable, but seemed disproportionate to the amount of trouble they had gone through to get rid of the terrifying monster. Ultimately, dormant humans like them were really not supposed to battle awakened Nightmare Creatures.

'No way, really?' he thought to himself, full of sarcasm.

It was just their bad luck that there was not a single Dormant-rank creature in this whole damned region of the Dream Realm.

Sunny remembered his lofty plans of hunting weak monsters while safely protected from all their attacks by his tier-five Awakened armor and couldn't help but smile bitterly. Who knew that the Puppeteer's Shroud would turn out to be merely a minimum requirement for survival, as opposed to a huge, odds-defying advantage.

Still, that armor had already saved his life twice, so it was doing its job.

Speaking of armor...

He lowered his gaze.

Memory: [Starlight Legion Armor].

Memory Rank: Awakened.

Memory Type: Armor.

Memory Description: [Born in the all-consuming darkness, seven valiant heroes made an oath to return light to the cursed land. Time has erased their names and their faces, but the memory of the defiant oath still remains.]

'Teacher Julius would have been ecstatic to be reading this stuff.'

The old man used to be an avid explorer and student of the Dream Realm's history before becoming a professor in the Awakened Academy and settling down in one of the most prosperous human Citadels. He was still one of the leading researchers in that field, often irritating hunting expeditions with requests to explore this or that ruin.

Sadly, Sunny had no idea when they would meet again.

He cleared his throat and looked at Nephis.

"Anyway. I have a present for you."

She turned her head and looked at him with a bit of confusion.

"A... present?"

Sunny smiled.

"Yeah. I forgot to tell you that I received a Memory after we finished off the Centurion. Guess what type it is?"

He glanced at her expectedly. However, Changing Star did not guess. In fact, her expression did not even show a hint of curiosity. After an awkward pause, Sunny had to look away.

"Uh. It's an armor. So, give me your hand."

Physical contact was required to transfer a Memory. Otherwise, he would have preferred to avoid it for as long as possible. There had already been too much contact between them for his mental composure.

In retrospect, being invaded by the healing flame was a strangely intimate experience. Not to mention the memory of her soft touch...

Not that he had been in any condition to think about such things back then.

Staring right at him, Nephis slowly held out a hand. Sunny hurriedly grasped it in his own, wishing to be done with this part of the process as soon as possible.

Her skin was cool and soft.

Trying not to get distracted, he willed the Starlight Legion Armor to be expelled from his Soul Sea. One of the spheres of light disappeared from the Shadow Core's orbit. Immediately, he felt something akin to a spark of electricity moving through his body and into Changing Star's.

She blinked and retracted her hand.

Then, Nephis stood up, walked a few steps away from the edge of the cliff, and summoned the Memory.

Spinning sparks of light appeared around her. A moment later, they covered her porcelain body and turned into a black, skintight bodysuit made out of

an unknown, durable material. It looked quite similar to the rubbery seaweed that permeated the area.

Then, intricate pieces of pristine white plate armor materialized over the black bodysuit. First the greaves and vambraces, then articulated pauldrons and rerebraces, then cuisses and sabatons. Finally, a breastplate engraved with seven shining stars appeared to protect Neph's torso, short enough to pose no hindrance to her mobility. It was followed by a helmet with a white plume.

The engraving of the seven stars was identical to those carved into the giant knight statue's cuirass.

The armor looked light and elegant. It was simultaneously functional and flattering, both providing high levels of protection and accentuating the graceful lines of Changing Star's body. A stark contrast of black and white made for quite a striking sight.

Nephis dismissed the helmet, letting her silver hair move in the wind. Then, she summoned her sword and performed a few tentative pirouettes, testing out the weight and flexibility of the armor. Seemingly satisfied, she then let the sword disappear into the air.

Sunny observed all this in silence. When Neph was finally done, he asked:

"Well? How is it?"

She turned to him. Soon, a wide smile appeared on her face. Beaming with delight, Nephis hesitated and finally said with a bit of embarrassment:

"Much better."

Sunny heaved a sigh of relief.

At least now all three of them were properly clothed. That was good.

Really good!

Not only because Changing Star's combat effectiveness would dramatically increase due to the acquisition of a reliable armor, but also because now he wouldn't have to be distracted every time he saw her...

Chapter 55: Lucky People | Shadow Slave

When they returned to the makeshift camp, the first thing that Nephis did was come up to Cassie.

"Hey, Cas. Guess what."

The blind girl turned to her and smiled:

"You've finally received an armor-type Memory?"

Simultaneously, Nephis said:

"I found something decent to wear..."

Then she fell silent and stared at her smiling friend. Cassie laughed:

"The sound of your footsteps changed."

Changing Star blinked.

"Ah. I see. Well... it's from the Carapace Centurion."

While she was describing the armor to Cassia and letting her touch the mysterious white metal it was forged out of, Sunny relaxed and rested by the fire.

Some time later, Nephis was busy preparing dinner. Sunny was once again lying lazily on the stones and staring into the sky.

The sky, like always, was grey and unfriendly.

With all three of them equipped with decent armor, they were finally starting to resemble a real Awakened cohort. In fact, Sunny thought that their group was rather eye-catching even by Awakened standards.

In her light tunic and sea-wave cloak, beautiful and delicate Cassie looked like a princess. Lithe and poised, Nephis was like a noble knight tasked with protecting her. Sunny, however...

If he was generous to himself, he would say that he looked like a young squire.

But truthfully, he resembled a page boy a lot more — at best. If a random stranger were to see the three of them, that stranger would most likely assume that Sunny was either a lowly servant or a feeble ruffian that had been captured by the noble lady's guard.

'Well, that'll just add to their surprise when I stab them in the back.'

Wait... why would he stab a random stranger?

'Ah, who cares. I'm sure there'll be a reason.'

At that moment, Cassie sat down by his side. Sunny turned his head, looking at the blind girl with a bit of surprise.

She bit her lip.

"Nephis told me that you almost died yesterday."

'Oh, so that's what this is about.'

He shrugged.

"Yeah."

Then, with a silent sigh, Sunny added:

"But don't worry about it too much. It's not my first brush with death."

Although it was, as far as he knew, the closest. The memory still sent shivers running down his spine.

Cassie was silent for a while. Then, she quietly said:

"I'm sorry."

Sunny raised his eyebrows.

"Sorry? What are you sorry for?"

The blind girl lowered her eyes.

"For being so useless."

Sunny frowned and looked away. A second or two later, he said in his usual careless tone:

"You're not useless."

Cassie softly chuckled.

"Aren't I? If I want to walk, I need to be leashed to you or Neph. If I want to eat, I need to wait for one of you to feed me. That's my life now. I can't do even the simplest of things without your help... let alone be of use to either of you in return."

Slowly, her voice turned raw with emotion. This was the first time Sunny had seen her mask of resolve slip a little, revealing the desperate, angry, frightened face beneath. He was silent for a long time. Then, he said:

"Hey, have I ever told you about my First Nightmare?"

The blind girl shook her head. Sunny half-closed his eyes.

"My First Nightmare was as bad as it gets. To tell you the truth, the situation was pretty hopeless. I was a slave destined to die of cold or mistreatment. Chained, bleeding, defenseless. What's worse, my Aspect turned out to be completely useless. I mean, literally. If I remember correctly, the phrase the Spell chosen to describe it was "a useless wretch with no skills or abilities worth a mention."

Cassie turned her head slightly, visibly drawn in by his words.

"Then... how did you survive? Did things change for the better?"

Sunny smiled.

"Gods no. In fact, they quickly turned worse. Much, much worse. But, what would you know? In a strange twist of fate, my useless Aspect turned out to be the only thing that could guide me through that mess alive. In that regard, I was incredibly lucky."

He shifted a little and glanced at the delicate girl, noticing a thoughtful frown on her face.

"But here is a thing about luck. People usually speak about it as though luck is something that just happens to you. It's not. Luck is fifty percent circumstance and fifty percent your own ability to grasp it. Luck is something you have to make happen yourself. I fought with everything I had to survive. That's one of the two reasons I'm still here."

Saying that, Sunny remembered the cold, dark mountain and shivered. Then, pushing the chilling memories away, he continued:

"The second reason is the Spell itself. I won't go as far as to call it reasonable, but it is fair... in its own, perverted way. The Spell takes with one hand and gives with the other. It was like this with my First Nightmare, and it is the same with you."

Cassie's frown deepened. Sunny chose his next words very carefully. Eventually, he said:

"Your Flaw is the most debilitating one I have ever seen or heard of. You are right, without help from someone like Neph, it would have been a certain death sentence. And people like her... well, I'm not even sure that someone else like that exists. But..."

The blind girl gritted her teeth.

"But what?"

Sunny looked at her with a serious expression.

"But that also means that the other side of the Flaw, your power, is equally as extraordinary. You just haven't found the way to grasp it yet. When you do... believe me, you'll remember this conversation and feel very embarrassed about how naive and foolish you were."

Cassie's expression changed to one of doubt and confusion.

"Do you really think so?" she whispered.

There was a hint of desperate desire in her voice. However, the question itself almost made him laugh, for an obvious reason.

"Trust me. I'm the most honest person in the world. Two worlds, in fact."

...Sunny would actually love nothing more than to be less honest, but, sadly, he was physically incapable of doing so. Of course, she didn't have to know that.

Cassie was silent for a long time, lost in thought. It looked as though she was in the throes of some inner struggle. Sunny almost assumed that their conversation was over, but then she suddenly said in a low, raspy voice:

"I had more visions than I told you guys about."

Chapter 56: The Heaviest Thing In The World

He blinked, staring at the blind girl with surprise and a bit of apprehension. Her sudden statement really threw him off. Why would she keep something like this secret? And why tell him now?

Confused, he asked carefully:

"More... visions? Why haven't you told us?"

A fleeting, tired smile appeared on Cassie's face. She lowered her head and remained silent for a while. Then, closing her eyes, she said:

"You probably don't know. How could you know? But knowledge... knowledge can be really heavy. It can be as heavy as the heaviest thing in the world."

Then, a sad smile appeared on her face.

"I am afraid that by telling you, I will actually cause the things I saw to come true."

Sunny tensed up, alarmed by the implication behind her words. If she was afraid of the visions coming true, then their content must have been pretty bad. And if it was really bad...

If something terrible was destined to befall them, Sunny had to know about it in advance. That way, he would be able to make preparations and deal with whatever happens. As long as he was prepared, many things would become much less dire. However... what if his preparations would become the very reason for that terrible thing to happen, making Cassie's vision a self-fulfilling prophecy?

This was the danger of knowing the future.

'Damn it, my head hurts. I hate this crap!'

Sunny struggled for a long time, trying to decide if he should pressure Cassie to reveal her visions. Either outcome was going to leave him uneasy, so he was really not sure what to do. In the end, unable to make a decision, Sunny simply remained silent. Cassie also didn't say anything.

After some time had passed, she finally spoke:

"Can you... can you just promise me one thing?"

It seemed as though this was her attempt to find a compromise between revealing everything and doing nothing. Sunny frowned.

"That depends on what it is."

The blind girl hesitated before speaking.

"Can you promise that you'll take care of Neph? No matter what?"

He delayed answering for as long as the growing pain allowed him. When it became almost unbearable, Sunny reluctantly said:

"I can't. I can barely take care of myself."

He also didn't trust Nephis enough to make a promise like that. He had nothing against Changing Star and even liked her quite a bit, but they didn't really know each other. Their alliance was one of necessity, not choice. Who knew what would happen once their need for each other was no longer there? "No matter what" was too steep of a requirement.

Of course, he could have misled Cassie by answering "yes". After all, the question was whether or not he could make a promise, not whether or not he would follow through with it. But at that moment, Sunny was strangely reluctant to deceive the blind girl.

Maybe that whole honesty thing was slowly growing on him.

Cassie sighed and turned away. Suddenly, it felt like something imperceptible about her changed.

"I see. Yeah. That's fair."

With that, she summoned her staff and walked away, leaving Sunny in a somber and uneasy mood — just like he had expected.

No matter how much he tried to relax after that, his thoughts kept wandering. Eventually, Sunny found himself trying to find connections between various pieces of information about the Starless Void — or the Forgotten Shore, as it was called in the Azure Blade's description.

If nothing else, it could distract him from thinking about the latter part of their conversation with Cassie.

Also, for some reason, the need to understand their environment suddenly seemed much more vital.

His sword, the Starlight Legion Armor, the carapace monsters and the giant headless statue seemed to be connected in some way, but he couldn't quite understand how. Was the statue a monument to one of the seven founders of the Starlight Legion?

The line of runes describing the armor said that their names and faces were lost to time. The statue's missing head would certainly fit that description.

The scavenger's Echo suggested that the carapace monsters were "cursed soldiers of the fallen legion". Was that fallen legion the Starlight Legion? The fact that he had received the Starlight Armor after slaying a carapace centurion was almost a certain confirmation of that theory. If so, why were they cursed?

Starless Void, Starlight Legion... what did all of it mean? The seven heroes were described as being born in the "all-consuming darkness". Their oath was to return light to the cursed land. What light did they seek? Starlight? And what was the nature of the all-consuming darkness?

Was it the manifestation of the curse that befell their land? And if so, was it the same curse that eventually turned soldiers of the Starlight Legion into carapace monsters?

If the curse was still around... was Sunny going to wake up one day with patches of chitin growing over his skin?

'What a creepy thought.'

The seven heroes were forgotten, but the memory of their oath, apparently, still remained. "On this forgotten shore, only stell remembers"... that was the Azure Blade's description. Was there a hidden meaning behind these words? Were the Memories received on the Forgotten Shore hiding a secret?

Inwardly, Sunny groaned.

'So many questions, and not a single answer!'

And then there was the main mystery — Cassie's vision... the one she chose to reveal to them. She dreamt of a boundless darkness locked behind seven seals. Once the seals were broken, the darkness escaped. She also saw a crimson spire with seven severed heads guarding seven locks. Were these locks connected to the seals?

And was the giant knight's missing head one of the seven guarding them?

Or was he completely wrong about everything, leaping to conclusions and forcing connections where none existed?

Sunny sighed, knowing that his curiosity would not be quenched any time soon. He had too little information to make a proper theory. If so, there was no point in torturing himself right now...

Maybe things would become clearer in the future.

The word "future" made him frown.

Chapter 57: Use Of Weapons

In the evening, Sunny continued to practice with the sword under Neph's watchful eye. With his new insight, every movement felt different from before. After the thousand strikes were finished, he sat down to rest and studied the Azure Blade, tempted to continue obsessing over the abundant mysteries of the Forgotten Shore.

After a while, Sunny asked:

"Do you think I'm well-suited to use a sword? Should I consider switching weapons in the future?"

Nephis shrugged.

"That depends on your goals. However, the sword is considered to be the king of weapons for a reason."

Sunny smiled.

"And why is that?"

She tilted her head and deliberated for a few seconds. Then, she asked:

"Do you know how natural selection works?"

He raised an eyebrow.

"Survival of the fittest? The strongest species survives?"

Changing Star glanced at him.

"Somewhat correct. But actually, it's not the strongest species that survive, it's the most adaptable. Otherwise, lions and tigers and bears would have been the ones ruling the world instead of humans."

Sunny knew about lions and bears from archival footage, but he had no idea what a tiger was.

'Probably another extinct predator?'

Meanwhile, Neph continued, not at all like her usual taciturn self. She seemed to be much more eloquent when talking about subjects she was confident in.

"The same logic can be applied to combat. A sword is not the most effective tool in every situation. A spear is more useful against enemies with long reach. A war hammer is much better against armor. A mace is easier to maintain. However, swords are the most versatile."

She cast a gaze at the Azure Blade.

"A sword can pierce, it can cut, it can bash. It can be used effectively at a variety of ranges. It is swift and maneuverable. Every part of the sword, from tip to pommel, can be used to attack. While wielding a sword, you won't be the best at everything. But you'll be the most adaptable."

Nephis turned to him.

"Do you understand?"

Sunny thought for a bit before answering.

"I think I do."

She gave him a nod and looked away.

"But in the end, you must remember one thing. It doesn't matter that much what's in your hands. A sword, a spear, a club... that's just tools. You are the weapon."

He sighed and dismissed the Azure Blade. As always, Changing Star's lesson gave him a lot to think about.

'You are the weapon.'

He repeated it in his mind, feeling as though another piece of the puzzle had fallen into place.

Together, they watched the sun set in comfortable silence. As the night approached, the sea was coming back, flooding the crimson labyrinth like a rush of darkness. Far below them, scavengers were scurrying to find a hiding place. A few of them were climbing the cliffs, hoping to spend the night on the small island.

Sunny's shadow was keeping an eye on them.

"We're going to have guests soon," he said, disheartened at the thought that their short respite was about to end.

Nephis sighed.

"That's alright. With the higher ground advantage, dealing with them won't be too hard."

Sunny nodded and looked at the disappearing sun. Suddenly, his mood turned solemn. Doubt raised its ugly head, plunging his mind into the gloomy embrace of anxiety. Staring into the distance, Sunny hesitated and asked:

"Do you think we'll be able to reach that castle?"

She glanced at him with no particular expression on her face.

"Yes."

He turned to her and forced a smile.

"Why are you so sure?"

In the blood-red blaze of the sunset, Changing Star's calm eyes seemed to burn with heavenly fire. Looking west, she summoned her sword and answered:

"If that is our will, who dares to stop us?"

Dealing with the climbing scavengers, indeed, turned out to be comparatively easy. Sunny and Nephis just had to ambush and push the bulky creatures off the cliff before they could find stable purchase. He received four shadow fragments practically for free, increasing the overall number to thirty-two. Sadly, the soul shards couldn't be retrieved.

They spent another day on the cliffs, resting and training. Sunny practiced with the sword while his shadow explored the nearby paths of the labyrinth. With the Echo still recovering, their group was not in its optimal condition. That's why there was no point in hastily abandoning their current camp.

However, very soon they were going to resume the journey west, moving from one height to another in hopes of reaching the mysterious human citadel.

This time they were not going to travel without sufficient preparations. Knowing that a sudden storm can come at any moment, covering the world with darkness and summoning the sea back before sunset, the three Sleepers decided to thoroughly scout a route before committing to moving their camp to the next landmark.

Nephis spent the day meditating. Her eyes were closed. From time to time, it seemed as though a soft white glow was radiating from behind her eyelids. However, when Sunny looked closely, it was always gone, making him think that he was just imagining things.

He suspected that Changing Star was training herself to endure the pain of her Flaw.

If so, he wished her luck.

Cassie behaved like her usual self, being cheerful and friendly. It was as though their strange conversation had never happened. However, Sunny could feel that something about her was different. He couldn't quite put a finger on what exactly had changed about the blind girl, but she seemed to possess more resolve. It wasn't a bad thing.

They spent some time chatting and remembering their time in the Academy. Sunny told her about his lessons with Teacher Julius and various strange things he had learned from the old man. Her reaction to the idea of studying dead languages of the Dream Realm was exactly the same as Sunny's initial protest and bewilderment.

Soon, the night was upon them again. This time, no scavenger tried to climb the cliffs, so Sunny and Nephis could rest easy. However, they still slept in turns, keeping watch over the camp in case something unexpected happens.

In the morning, they ate the last of the centurion's meat and prepared to climb down into the labyrinth.

It was time to continue their journey.

Chapter 58: Survival Of The Fittest

Days later, Sunny was sitting on top of a dead scavenger, calmly cleaning the azure blood off his face.

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

His sword was still stuck between the plates of chitin armor, trembling slightly as the beast's body convulsed before falling still.

Somewhere behind him, the sound of breaking carapaces announced that Nephis was already digging out soul shards from the corpses of the creatures they had slain. After dozens of such battles, the two of them were nothing if not efficient.

Glancing back, he evaluated the scene of carnage.

The path between two crimson walls was littered with corpses. Initially, they were simply planning to lure the carapace centurion that had been tracking them for the past few days into this narrow passage to turn its size against the monster. However, things quickly took a turn.

Attracted by the noise of the battle, both the scavengers and the weird centipede creatures that were waging war against the carapace legion in this part of the labyrinth showed up to join the fight. In the ensuing mayhem, Sunny and Nephis used the animosity between the two tribes of monsters to their advantage and ended up as the only victors.

Not far from him, the Echo was mutilating the corpse of the centurion. Its lost arm had long grown back. Now, the scavenger was tearing pieces of monster meat with its new pincer and vindictively devouring them.

Technically, an Echo wasn't supposed to experience hunger. This one, however, had seemingly acquired a hatred for carapace centurions after their encounter with the massive scythe slayer on that fateful stormy night.

It had already been two weeks since they left the cliffs. In that time, many things had changed, while many remained the same.

Moving from one high point to another, they steadily traveled west. With Cassie riding atop the Echo, the speed of the group was dramatically enhanced. Still, they took care to explore paths to their next stop before committing to a day-long journey.

This way, the risk of being caught in another storm was minimized, as they could always either reach the next landmark in time or return to the previous one.

Their approach to traveling through the labyrinth had also changed. In the past, Nephis and Sunny tried to avoid the scavengers, resorting to fighting them only if there was no other choice. However, the battle with the centurion opened their eyes to the fact that they desperately needed to become stronger, and do it fast.

That's why they began to actively hunt the carapace beasts, taking out any creatures that were either completely isolated or moving in groups of no more than three. The idea of two Sleepers consciously seeking out Nightmare Creatures of the Awakened rank was pretty ridiculous, but somehow, they made it work.

Just as Nephis had said, both of them were abnormal.

Clad in the Starlight Legion Armor, Changing Star, who had always been an extremely formidable fighter, was now able to showcase the full extent of her combat ability. Simply put, she was a menace. It seemed as though her silver sword had a mind of its own. Whenever the tall figure in white armor appeared, rivers of azure blood were sure to flow.

What's more, Neph's powers grew with each soul shard she consumed. Every increase was barely noticeable, but with dozens of them added up together, the difference was apparent. She was slowly approaching the line between the peak of human physical form and the threshold of superhuman prowess.

The same could be said about Sunny, although, in his case, it was predicated on the timely use of the shadow. His own body had become considerably stronger due to the rigors of the Dream Realm, but it was still far away from reaching its peak potential.

While Nephis was growing more powerful through the consumption of soul shards, he was quickly collecting shadow fragments. Of course, he wasn't able to get every kill, so their amount was less than that of the shards. But he also didn't have to share them with Cassie, which Changing Star was continuously doing.

As the result, the rate of their progress was more or less the same.

However, the slow accumulation of power was not the only factor that influenced the rapid growth of their combat effectiveness.

Sunny's skill level and battle sense were also improving by leaps and bounds. Under the tutelage of sword goddess Nephis herself, he was quickly learning the ins and outs of wielding the blade.

Then, he was forced to apply these lessons to practice, participating in bloody battles each day with his life on the line. This brutal, merciless reality was, for better or worse, the best training grounds for a true fighter. There was no room for mistakes, only progress — because a single mistake would most likely become his last.

One real fight was worth a thousand hours of training. With experience, Sunny was able to gain knowledge. With clarity, he was able to turn this knowledge into a seed of understanding.

But even that wasn't the biggest contributor to the dramatic increase in the group's overall might.

The main culprit was, to his endless surprise, teamwork.

After fighting side by side for so long, Sunny and Nephis had developed a tacit, intuitive understanding. Without the need for words and signals, they were able to act in unison with each other, perfectly coordinating their

attacks and actions to better control the battlefield and destroy their opponents.

The importance of this unity was hard to overestimate. With proper cooperation, it was as though their numbers doubled. The effect was immediate and overwhelming — at least as long as they chose their battles carefully. It was nothing short of jolly.

With all this added up together, their group had turned from a trio of lost kids into a cohort of well-equipped, experienced and battle-hardened survivors.

Even Cassie was becoming stronger. Apart from the boost she had received from absorbing the soul shards, the blind girl was also slowly learning to live and function with her disability.

After all, it was less than two months since she lost her sight. Cassie was still adapting to her condition, and she was doing an incredible job, considering the circumstances.

She was still unable to help them fight against the monsters, but the burden of taking care of her was becoming less and less heavy. Sunny had also grown accustomed to it, even finding the time spent watching over the blind girl somewhat calming.

The goal of reaching the human castle did not seem as impossible as it had before.

And now, he felt as though they were getting closer and closer.

Chapter 59: Shadow Of The Crimson Spire

Jumping off the dead scavenger, Sunny retrieved his sword and whistled, letting Cassie know that it was safe to come out. Soon, she crawled out of a small opening in the coral wall and carefully put her feet on the ground. Leaning on her staff, the blind girl stood up and slightly turned her head, listening to the light sound of his footsteps.

Sunny approached Cassie and took her hand, gently placing it on his shoulder. Then, carefully avoiding puddles of blood, he guided the blind girl to the Echo. They talked on the way.

"Did those centipedes show up?"

During their journey through the labyrinth, they discovered that the scavengers were not the only creatures populating it. Different types of monsters lived in the crimson forest, hiding inside the reefs during the night and coming out to hunt once the sun was up.

There were sentient colonies of carnivorous worms that attacked from beneath the black mud, flesh-eating flowers that strangled their prey with bloodsucking vines, and weird transparent tentacles that they had once seen dragging a desperately resisting scavenger into a dark, cavernous crevice.

They still didn't know what type of creature had been hiding in the crevice. Sunny hoped that they would never find out.

In short, the labyrinth was home to all kinds of horrors, every one of them at least of the Awakened rank. They were all carrion eaters, living off the remains left behind by the monsters of the dark sea. Given the opportunity, they were also more than willing to devour each other — not to mention the three juicy humans.

Luckily, the carapace legion turned out to be extremely territorial and seemed to have the upper hand in this region of the crimson reef. While their armor, size and physical strength made the scavengers formidable

opponents, dealing mostly with one type of creature was infinitely better than constantly facing unknown danger.

The centipede monsters were the latest enemy of the carapace legion they had met. Some of these critters were more than three meters long, with glistening red chitin and hundreds of tiny, scurrying legs. They were abhorrently fast and agile, being able to move through mud, climb the coral walls and even drop on the unsuspecting victims from above with incredible speed.

What's worse, their bodies were able to secrete a corrosive black oil that melted through the strongest armor in seconds. The only redeeming quality of the centipede monsters was that their chitin shells weren't very tough and could be easily pierced by a sword.

Sunny answered without turning back:

"Yeah, six of them. And a few scavengers, too. We let them fight each other and then finished off the survivors."

Cassie gulped.

"Were you hurt?"

"Nothing our armor couldn't handle."

"What about the centurion?"

He glanced at the half-devoured carcass and smiled.

"It's not going to bother us again."

This was the second awakened monster they had slain after entering the Dream Realm. Compared to the first encounter, this battle went much smoother. No one died, no one was seriously injured.

The Echo even kept both of its pincers.

"How many soul shards did we get?"

Sunny counted.

"Should be eleven."

Now it was Cassie's turn to smile.

"That's our biggest haul so far! By a lot!"

He nodded.

"Yeah."

However, they had once again failed to receive a Memory. Sunny wasn't sure if his bad luck was to blame, but neither he nor Nephis had been able to acquire a single one for the past two weeks. It was almost as though the Spell had decided that they had already gotten enough.

'There can never be enough!'

He sighed.

One of the games he and Cassie liked to play during camp was to discuss what they would buy after coming back to the real world and becoming rich. However, he had to collect a few Memories to auction off first. Otherwise, where would the money come from?

Consumed by greed and avarice, Sunny approached the Echo and looked up at it with disapproval.

"Hey, you! Stop chewing!"

The scavenger obediently froze, a piece of meat still hanging from its mouth.

"Spit it out!"

Shaking his head, Sunny helped Cassie climb to her seat and handed her the reigns.

"This weirdo actually gobbled up almost half of the centurion. What's up with that? Of all the Echoes in the world, why did I have to get stuck with a defective one?"

His shadow solemnly nodded, expressing that it completely understood his sentiment. Sunny squinted at it. What a rare show of solidarity. The shadow didn't have any Echoes, though...

What defective individual was it stuck with?

'Cheeky bastard...'

Cassie laughed.

"Don't badmouth my steed. He is a great Echo! I like him very much."

'It's a "he" now, huh?'

Sunny shook his head again and got to stripping the remaining meat off the centurion's carcass. Then, he placed the meat into the seaweed saddlebags attached to the scavenger. He had made these bags himself to increase the group's carrying capacity. After all, the scavenger was supposed to be extremely strong — not using it to their advantage would have been an oversight.

After that, Sunny sighed and got to the least pleasant task — harvesting the oil sacks from the centipede monsters' corpses. Each had two of them, connected to a special gland. The whole process was more disgusting than dangerous, since the corrosive effect was only achieved after the liquids from the two sacks were mixed.

They had not come up with a way to utilize the centipede oil yet, but Nephis insisted on collecting as much of it as possible. She was sure that it was going to be of use one day.

At the very least, the oil was highly flammable.

Speaking of Nephis, by the time Sunny was done collecting the sacks, she had already gathered all the soul shards and was standing in front of the

Echo. He showed her his trophies and carefully placed them in a separate saddlebag.

"All done?"

She nodded.

Sunny looked at the sky, trying to determine the time. The sun was right above them, high in the grey sky. There was still plenty of daytime left.

"What do you think? We're right inbetween the Flat Hill and the Bone Ridge. Should we return or try to reach the Ridge today?"

The ground level of the labyrinth was not uniform. Some parts of it were situated higher than the others. Currently, they were in one such area. The dark sea was much more shallow here, which meant that there were more natural features that remained above water during the night. That made for shorter distance between them.

Nephis thought for a bit, then said:

"Let's push to the Bone Ridge."

They had already scouted most of the way to it yesterday, so there wasn't much danger of getting lost in the labyrinth and not making it on time. With the carapace centurion dead, the unpredictable element that had been making their lives harder for these past few days was also gone. Considering this, Changing Star's decision seemed proper.

Sunny nodded.

"Okay."

With that, he sent his shadow forward.

Some time later, they were approaching the Bone Ridge. The sun was preparing to set, but there was still enough time to get to safety. Sunny,

however, felt alarmed and uncomfortable.

This feeling began to pursue him soon after they had left the cliffs. It always appeared close to the evening and persisted until the last minutes of the sunset, then disappeared, leaving him puzzled and uneasy. The further west they traveled, the stronger the feeling became.

It was as though something was not quite right with the world during that time. But no matter how hard Sunny tried to understand what that wrongness was, he couldn't.

In the end, he decided to share his uneasiness with the group. After listening to him, the girls were surprised. It seemed that they did not notice anything strange. Even Cassie, whose affinity to revelations provided her with an incredible intuition, didn't experience the strange feeling.

However, she did suggest a theory. Since Sunny was the only one susceptible to the feeling, it was logical to assume that there was something unique about him that made it possible. And the only difference he had from the girls in terms of perception was his shadow sense.

Which meant that the source of the wrongness, most likely, had something to do with the behavior of shadows.

Guided by her advice, Sunny was finally able to understand the reason for his discomfort. As it turns out, Cassie was right — in the hours closest to sunset, when the sun was hanging low in the western skies, a vast shadow moved through the labyrinth, affecting his senses and making his skin crawl.

The shadow was too distant and colossal to be seen, but he could still feel its presence.

When he told Cassie about the immense shadow, she nodded, as though it explained everything.

Then, she said:

"That is the shadow of the Crimson Spire."

Chapter 60: Bone Ridge | Shadow Slave

Back then, it took him a couple of seconds to realize what she was talking about.

"The spire from your vision? The one with seven seals?"

Cassie nodded.

"Yes. In my dream, it seemed to be as tall as a mountain. I could even see it from the walls of the human castle, looming in the distance like a crimson spear piercing the skies. When the sun sets, the Spire's vast shadow falls over the castle and stretches east, as far as you can see."

She was silent for a moment, then added:

"The feeling I got when looking at the Crimson Spire was very similar to what you had described, only much more intense."

Sunny frowned, trying to remember the exact words Cassie had used to describe her vision. Seven severed heads guarding seven seals... a dying angel being devoured by hungry shadows... feeling of extreme terror and loss...

What was the deal with that Spire, exactly?

"Is it crimson because it's made out of the same stuff as the labyrinth?"

The crimson "coral" surrounding them was not, in fact, coral. It's just what they called it based on some resemblance, for the sake of simplicity. The actual nature of the strange material remained a mystery.

Cassie hesitated.

"Maybe it's the other way around. Maybe the labyrinth is made from the same stuff as the Spire."

In other words, the Crimson Spire might have been the source of all this madness. Still, it was just a theory — there was too little information to confirm it.

However, Sunny did feel that the Spire was, in one way or another, at the center of all things that they had encountered. He just hoped that it wouldn't be their final destination.

Knowing the reason behind his restlessness, Sunny was able to endure it much better. He even found a hidden benefit to this situation — as long as he sensed the shadow of the Crimson Spire, he could pinpoint the direction to the human castle, since it was situated somewhere between their location and the source of the shadow.

In a sense, the Crimson Spire had become his inner compass.

"Get ready."

Neph's voice took Sunny out of his reverie. Shaking off the distracting thoughts, he focused on the task at hand.

They were getting close to the Bone Ridge.

This name came to their minds as soon as they had first laid their eyes on this towering landmark. It was visible from quite a distance, sharply contrasted against the crimson coral and the grey sky in all its ivory splendor.

The Bone Ridge was, in fact, made of bone. The skeletal remains of a colossal sea monster lay on an enormous mound of chaotically growing coral, with its arching spine protruding especially high above the ground. It was impossible to say what the terrifying creature had looked like while it was still alive, but one thing was certain — it was gargantuan even by the standards of the dark sea.

This wasn't the first giant skeleton they saw during their journey. In fact, the labyrinth was littered with remains of dead leviathans, their massive bones forming natural arches and palaces throughout it. They were easy to spot

because the coral formations were especially tall and dense in their vicinity, as though trying to bury any sign of whiteness in the sea of crimson.

Sunny, however, had a feeling that the situation was actually reversed. To him, it seemed as though the coral was actually growing out of the old bones and spreading in every direction, slowly consuming the world. When he looked at the crimson mounds surrounding the colossal remains, he couldn't help but see them as rivers of ancient, solidified blood.

He was almost sure that if they were to dig deep enough into the black mud to find the roots of the crimson forest, they would find nothing but endless layers of bones.

What a scary image.

Regardless of what Sunny thought about the nature of the labyrinth, the beast whose remains formed the Bone Ridge was especially large. Thanks to that, a portion of its long spine was tall enough to remain above the water during the night. That's why they had chosen it as the next stop on their journey.

With the evening approaching, the next task was crucial. They had to scale the dead leviathan and make sure that no other creature had decided to take shelter in its remains.

If something did, they had no choice but to try and kill it, since there was no time to retreat to their previous safe haven.

The last step was often the riskiest.

Coming to the base of the coral mound, the group moved around it, searching for a convenient path up. Eventually, they arrived in front of the creature's cracked, misshapen skull. With its lower jaw missing or buried under the mud, the upper formed a vast, cavernous cave.

Feeling shivers running down his spine, Sunny passed beneath the terrifying palisade of teeth and entered the cave. With his shadow leading the way,

they made way to the back of the creature's skull and soon entered the hollow expanse of its spine.

Inside the spine, the bone surface under their feet was as wide as a road. Actually, it looked a lot like a highway running through a long tunnel, with stark beams of light falling through the gaps between the massive vertebrae. The tunnel was inclined upward, most of its length hidden behind the bend of the ceiling.

When the Echo entered the spine, its chitin legs produced a loud, echoing clatter.

Nephis grimaced.

"Any movement?"

Sunny checked with the shadow and shook his head.

Changing Star looked forward and slightly lowered her chin.

"Let's proceed."

Despite the fact that the shadow had not noticed any danger, they still summoned their swords before moving forward. It was not their first time being ambushed at the edge of safety.

Luckily, their precautions turned out to be unnecessary. Nothing was hiding inside the gargantuan remains, so they were able to reach the highest point of the spine without having to cut their way through an unknown number of monsters.

By the time they got to safety, the sun was already setting. The dark sea was returning, filling the inside of the sea monster's spine with the echoing sound of rushing water. Sunny took the saddlebags off the Echo and dismissed it, making their camp instantly feel much roomier.

All three of them were in desperate need of a bath. Leaving the girls alone to give them an opportunity to wash themselves, Sunny walked some distance away and sat down, letting his tired body rest.

His shadow returned to the lower parts of the spine, watching the black, dim water slowly rise and devour the ivory whiteness. He had to make sure that nothing would crawl out of the water at the last minute.

With half of his mind preoccupied with observing the rising tide, the other half was free to wander. Sunny summoned the runes and checked the number of shadow fragments in his possession.

Shadow Fragments: [96/1000].

Not bad... he only had twelve at the beginning of all this. In less than a month, the amount increased dramatically. He was stronger and faster now. He was also more experienced.

However, that still left him far inferior to even the weakest Nightmare Creatures of the Forgotten Shore in terms of raw physical might, even with the help of the shadow.

'How long before I'm able to wrestle a scavenger with my bare hands?'

The answer was pretty obvious, not to mention extremely disappointing — not before his own Shadow Core had awakened, which could only happen after returning to the real world.

Sunny sighed.

Soon, it was his turn to wash. Taking the Bottle of Endless Water from refreshed, rosy Cassie, he walked back to his secluded spot and dismissed the Puppeteer's Shroud.

A cold breeze touched his pale skin, making Sunny shiver. He looked down, shaking his head at the amount of dirt, sweat and dried blood that was covering his body.

Being an Awakened was not the cleanest of professions.

While he was washing up, Nephis used the remaining time before nightfall to make a fire and cook some meat. These days, they even had salt to

season it. At first, the idea of using the sea salt left behind by the dark sea did not seem very appealing, but after a while, they grew accustomed to it.

Salt made every meal they had much tastier.

They ate in silence, too hungry and tired to talk. Soon, it was time to sleep.

Sunny took the first watch, planning to fit in some sword practice before it was his turn to rest. Going through the motions of the basic kata, he split his mind in two. One part was concentrating on the movements of his body, while the other, smaller part, was observing the surface of the black water through his shadow.

In the absence of wind, the dark circle covering the lower part of the spine was strangely calm. This was his first time seeing the black water without the constant undulation of waves, with its surface strangely flat and absolutely still.

It looked like a giant mirror, one that was made of pure darkness.

It was unnaturally mesmerizing. Suddenly, he felt a strong desire to come closer and take a look at his reflection.

However, Sunny didn't move.

He was terrified of what might look back.

Chapter 61: Sea Of Ash

In the morning, Sunny woke up feeling grim and uneasy. The memory of the frightening dark mirror was still fresh in his mind, making every shadow seem sinister and foreboding. He scowled sullenly.

'What the hell. I'm the Child of Shadows. Why do I have to be afraid of my own domain?'

But then again, darkness and shadow were not the same, even if a lot of people tended to mistake one for another. Shadows were born from the absence of light. In a sense, they were manifestations of emptiness. True darkness, on the other hand... true darkness was its own entity.

In a sense, shadows shared more in common with light than they did with darkness.

'I mean... I guess they do. Do they?'

Philosophical debates with his internal monologue were not the best way to start the day, at least as far as Sunny was concerned. His already sour mood only got worse. With a short sigh, he sat up and stretched his arms, yawning.

"Good morning."

The sound of his voice was almost drowned by the echoing noise of rushing water. With the sun rising, the dark sea was in a hurry to retreat. Sunny was finally able to relax a little.

"Morning."

Nephis had been guarding the camp during the latter part of the night, so she was already awake. As usual, she was meditating with her eyes closed — in the absolute darkness of the night, "watching over" something actually meant listening for suspicious sounds, so keeping one's eyes open was not that useful.

For everyone except Sunny, that is, who had perfect night vision thanks to his Attributes.

Hearing him stand up, Changing Star slowly opened her eyes. A soft afterglow left behind by the dancing white flame could still be seen in their depth, quickly disappearing as her sight adjusted to the twilight of dawn. She looked at Sunny and offered him a polite smile.

In the past two weeks, Nephis had also been training, perhaps even more diligently than him. However, she wasn't trying to improve her swordsmanship.

She was actually trying to learn how to behave like a normal human. As the result, their interactions had become slightly less awkward... for the most part.

Sunny was able to recognize Changing Star's efforts because they were very similar to a phase he himself had gone through many years ago. On several occasions, he had caught her intently observing how Cassie talked and behaved around them. Sometime later, Neph would randomly try to mimic small details of her friend's behavior. The results were... a mixed bag, to say the least.

The first time she tried to greet him with a smile in the morning, Sunny panicked and almost summoned the Azure Blade. However, Nephis was very smart and persistent. Today, her polite smile looked almost natural.

He had no idea why Changing Start decided to work on her social skills, of all things, during their perilous journey through the monster-infested hellscape that was the Forgotten Shore. But he didn't mind.

It was actually rather entertaining to watch!

...Watching her torture herself every day, enduring terrible pain in hopes of learning to better control her Aspect Ability, on the contrary, was not fun at all. They never talked about it, but Sunny knew that every time Nephis pretended to meditate, she was actually subjecting herself to the excruciating agony of her Flaw.

When he thought about it, his heart ached. Sunny wasn't used to feeling such things, but he suspected that this was what other people called "compassion". At least it was similar to how it was described in books and dramas.

Not that he knew a lot about that stuff.

After they had breakfast, Nephis stood up and looked at the beam of light falling through the nearest gap between giant vertebrae. Turning to Sunny, she said:

"Let's study the surroundings."

They needed to get the lay of the land and decide on their next step. Usually, that implied looking for the nearest natural features that were high enough to stay above the surface of the sea and deciding on which one they would try to reach next.

Then came a day or two of scouting and hunting, followed by moving the camp to that feature.

Sunny gave her a nod.

"Alright."

He summoned the Echo to guard Cassie while they were away and left the shadow behind to keep an eye out, just in case something happens. Then Sunny followed Nephis to the gap.

Boosting her, he watched as Changing Star flew through the air and then seemingly ran up the wall, kicking herself off at the last moment and propelling her body even higher before grabbing onto a bone protrusion. Relying only on her upper body strength, she then climbed up and disappeared into the cascading light. Soon, the golden rope fell down, allowing him to follow.

Nephis helped him climb atop the gargantuan spine and then straightened, turning to take a look west. Sunny shook his hands and did the same,

expecting to see the usual picture — an endless expanse of the crimson labyrinth, dotted here and there with rare high points.

However, what they saw left them both speechless.

Some distance away, the labyrinth seemed to lose color. The crimson blades of coral stood grey and misshapen, as though struck by some unknown disease and drained of all life. The stone-like material looked brittle and fragile, ready to crumble to dust at any moment.

The patch of dead coral spread for as far as the eye could see. Further away, the walls of the labyrinth seemed to have collapsed into a sea of ash-grey sand. This ashen wasteland looked so alien and strange after weeks of seeing only the endless crimson pathways that Sunny felt a shiver run down his spine.

The fact that they didn't notice even a single monster moving through the mud beneath made him feel even more disturbed.

There was only one visible high point to the west of them. Far away into the distance, the ground rose, forming a tall hill. The hill was probably the largest they had seen, easily capable of becoming a real island once the water rose in the night. Its shape reminded Sunny of a colossal barrow.

Covered in the grey sand left behind by dead coral, the hill resembled a mountain of ash. That mountain was crowned by a giant tree.

The tree rose into the sky like a tower, its branches wide enough to cover the whole island in their shade. The bark of the giant tree was as black as the water of the dark sea, while its leaves were red as blood.

Contrasted against the grey sky, the crimson crown of the majestic tree looked incredibly vibrant and magnificent.

Sunny gulped.

"What... the hell... is that?"

Nephis was either thinking or had nothing to say. She just stared into the distance, a slight frown on her face.

At that moment, something glistened brightly from beneath the tree. The glimmer was clear and easily visible even from their position, like a beam of sunlight reflected by a large mirror. A moment later, it was gone, only to appear again after a few seconds.

'A mirror...'

Sunny shivered, remembering the previous night. For some reason, the bright glimmer suddenly seemed to become menacing.

After some time had passed, he addressed Neph again:

"What do you think?"

She lingered a bit before turning to him. While Changing Star was deliberating on what to say, he glanced at the ashen wasteland again. Finally, she spoke:

"This is the only way west."

Sunny grimaced and looked away.

He didn't like this turn of events one bit.

"So, we are going?"

Nephis turned to face the giant tree and, as though affected by its grandeur, hesitantly shrugged.

"Do we have a choice?"

Some time later, they abandoned the remains of the giant sea monster and moved west, planning to check the situation inside the wasteland that lay between them and the Ashen Barrow.

Initially, they weren't planning to approach the strange island. However, things turned out to be rather unusual once they entered the wasteland.

With grey sand under their feet and dead coral walls surrounding them, the group was fully prepared to face unknown danger. Despite the fact that they had not seen any monster moving through this area from the top of the leviathan's spine, neither Sunny nor Nephis truly believed that no one was going to attack them in this strange region of the labyrinth.

There were too many ways for the Nightmare Creatures to hide themselves, and if there was one thing the Sleepers had learned during their time on the Forgotten Shore, it was that everything here was either deadly or concealing something capable of killing them. In that regard, their first encounter with the carnivorous worms was especially traumatic.

However, their common sense turned out to be wrong this time around. The wasteland was quiet and empty, completely void of any signs of life. The absence of monsters was, in theory, supposed to make Sunny feel better, but he felt even more nervous than usual instead.

This whole situation reeked of danger. It was strange and unnatural.

If even the monsters were afraid to approach this place, what were they doing walking deeper and deeper into the wasteland of their own free will?

Were they fools not to turn around and run away immediately?

Soon, they reached the point where the walls of the labyrinth had crumbled into dust. Now, there was nothing but a vast expanse of grey sand between them and the hill crowned by the giant tree.

Nothing could hide on that ashen flat.

However, they would also be unable to conceal themselves from anyone's gaze.

Sunny glanced at Nephis.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

Changing Star scowled and lowered her chin. Then, looking forward, she scowled and said:

"Let's go."

Chapter 62: Hide And Seek

As soon as they left the familiar confines of the labyrinth and stepped into the vast expanse of the ashen wasteland, Sunny felt strangely uncomfortable. It was as though he had unknowingly turned slightly agoraphobic while traveling through the complicated madness of the crimson maze.

He had grown accustomed to being surrounded by tall walls of coral, with endless tangled paths stretching in all directions for as far as he could see. Despite the fact that the labyrinth was hiding numerous dangers, it also offered a strange sort of safety.

At least in the case of Sunny, who had the advantage of being able to see beyond its twists and turns thanks to his stealthy Shadow Scout.

Now, with grey sand beneath and nothing to break the line of sight, he had lost that advantage. The idea of not being able to hide from the enemy made him feel naked.

'Keep cool. There's no one here.'

That thought, which was supposed to calm him down, had the opposite effect instead. Indeed, there were no Nightmare Creatures anywhere in the desolate wasteland... but why was that?

What made them so eager to avoid this place?

Nephis was walking in the front of the group, with Sunny right behind her. The Echo was in the rear, moving at a slow pace. He looked around and, after a bit of hesitation, said in a low voice:

"I don't like this."

Nephis glanced at him with her usual indifferent expression. Turning away, she simply said:

"Stay alert."

They continued forward in silence, sand squeaking under their feet. A dozen or so minutes later, Changing Star raised her hand, gesturing them to stop. Turning to Sunny, she asked:

"Has your shadow noticed anything?"

He shook his head.

"No. There are some irregularities here and there, like small knolls or shallow pits, but nothing is moving. Mostly, it just seems flat and lifeless."

He turned to Cassie and asked hesitantly:

"Do you hear anything?"

In some cases, her keen hearing was more effective than his shadow sense. When they were caught by the storm, Cassie had been able to sense that something was wrong long before her seeing companions noticed anything.

However, this time it was of no use. She simply shook her head, indicating that there were no unusual sounds around them.

Nephis sighed and lowered her head, thinking. Then she cast a gaze at the distant Ashen Barrow.

"Let's continue."

However, she did change the direction of the group slightly, aiming to approach one of the knolls that Sunny had noticed.

By the time they approached it, it was already noon. The sun was right above their heads, making their shadows small and shapeless. Sunny's own shadow had returned and was now hiding beneath his feet, looking like a formless blob of darkness.

This time of day was its least favorite.

Nephis summoned her sword and slowly approached the knoll, trying to determine its nature. There was nothing remarkable about it except for the fact that everything around was flat, and it was not. The knoll was about as tall as Sunny, somewhat oblong and covered in the same grey sand as the rest of the wasteland.

It didn't seem dangerous, but there was no harm in checking... well, most likely. Maybe it could provide them with some useful information.

Just as Changing Star was about to stretch her hand and touch the surface of the knoll, Sunny's shadow suddenly noticed something moving in the distance, back at the edges of the labyrinth where they had come from.

Acting on instinct, Sunny jumped toward the Echo and hissed to Neph:

"Hide!"

At the same time, he dismissed the hulking scavenger. Suddenly losing her mount, Cassie flung her hands up and fell. Catching her in the princess carry, Sunny darted toward the knoll and lowered himself to the ground, placing the blind girl between himself and crouching Nephis.

Changing Star put one hand on Cassie's shoulder and looked at him with a silent question in her eyes.

"Danger?"

Sunny raised one hand with his palm open, telling her to wait. His shadow was already peeking from behind the knoll, carefully observing the source of the movement.

Already some distance away, the dead walls of the labyrinth rose from the grey sand. Suddenly, one of them collapsed, knocked over by a massive figure. Surrounded by the cloud of ashen sand, the figure moved forward, stepping onto the flat surface of the wasteland.

Eight legs, two terrifying bone scythes, black and crimson carapace that looked like ancient armor that had been splattered with blood... another

centurion.

Sunny silently cursed.

They fought these monsters twice before, and won both times. However, that was because each battlefield had been carefully prepared to stack advantages in their favor, with plenty of planning and devious scheming on their part.

He wasn't sure that they would be able to kill one in a direct confrontation, at least not without suffering serious damage.

Turning to Nephis, Sunny whispered:

"A carapace centurion had just walked out of the labyrinth."

She scowled. Cassie, meanwhile, lightly touched his hand and asked:

"Where is it heading?"

Sunny blinked, then concentrated on the shadow's vision. Soon, he exhaled with some relief.

"Looks like it's heading for the Ashen Barrow. If we stay hidden behind this knoll and it doesn't change course, there's a high chance that it won't notice us."

Changing Star thought for a second and then nodded.

"Keep an eye on it and tell me as soon as something changes."

Trying to become as small and silent as possible, the three of them pressed their bodies to the knoll. There wasn't a lot of space to hide, so they had to endure being cramped against each other.

Well... maybe "endure" was not the right word. Sunny might have even enjoyed the situation in other circumstances...

'What are you thinking about, fool?! Concentrate on the dealy monster!' he thought angrily, berating himself.

But it was so hard to concentrate with Cassie's soft body pressed against his...

'DEADLY! MONSTER!'

Finally able to get his mind out of the gutter, Sunny sighed and focused on observing the centurion.

The hulking creature was moving through the wasteland, slowly drawing closer. Soon, he was able to see every crimson line and every spike on its weathered carapace. However, his eyes were glued to something else.

Cautiously held between the centurion's scythes, a beautiful crystal was gleaming with hypnotic inner light. It was bright and strangely alluring.

A transcendent soul shard.

They had already seen a similar scene, back when a pair of centurions were retrieving two of such crystals from the remains of the giant shark-like creature.

'So that was their destination.'

Sunny glanced at the magnificent tree standing atop the Ashen Barrow. With its onyx branches and vibrant scarlet leaves, it looked striking and majestic.

Like something holy hidden in the depths of hell.

He shared his findings with the group, careful to keep his whisper as quiet as possible.

The centurion was about to walk past their hiding spot. Despite the fact that there was some distance between its path and the knoll, Sunny was still nervous. This was the most dangerous moment.

The monster came level with the knoll, then proceeded forward without blinking an eye.

He exhaled.

"It's walking toward the Barrow."

Nephis did not relax, still ready for things to go south at any moment.

"Follow it."

Sunny nodded. A moment later, his shadow slid from behind the knoll, sneakily pursuing the Nightmare Creature. With how much the range of Shadow Control had improved, he was pretty sure of his ability to tail it to the footsteps of the ashen hill.

The centurion crossed the wasteland with the transcended shard clasped tightly between its scythes. Its bearing was somewhat strange, seeming almost... pious. It looked like a pilgrim walking toward a mysterious, sacred site.

Soon, it approached the Ashen Barrow and suddenly stopped, as though afraid to cross some invisible line. Then the centurion carefully placed the shard on the sand and backed away from it, its eyes turned to the ground.

After distancing itself from the gleaming crystal, the massive creature... kneeled.

Sunny had to rub his eyes to make sure that he wasn't seeing things.

He wasn't. The carapace centurion bent its eight legs and lowered itself to the ground, submissively placing its terrifying scythes in front of its bowing torso.

Noticing Sunny's strange behavior, Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"What is it?"

He hesitated.

"Wait."

At this moment, his shadow, which was safely hidden some distance away from the kneeling monster, noticed a slight change on the surface of the Ashen Barrow.

The bright glimmer they had seen from the top of the leviathan's spine was back. Only this time, it was even more blinding.

The glimmer rose into the air from the shadows cast by the branches of the towering tree and moved, slowly approaching the footsteps of the hill.

When Sunny was finally able to discern the source of the shining, his eyes widened.

Feeling a cold shiver running down his spine, he forgot to breathe.

Chapter 63: Lord Of Ashes

Moving through the ashen sand and piles of fallen leaves, a giant monster was coming down the hill.

Sunny gulped, his expression turning dark.

The creature was as large as a house, with its eight segmented legs resembling tall pillars. Its form was similar to that of scavengers and centurions, comprised of a crab-like carapace and a protruding, somewhat humanoid torso. However, this was where the similarities between them ended.

Instead of chitin, the behemoth's shell was seemingly made out of polished, lustrous metal. It was as though its whole body had been once submerged into a crucible of molten steel, emerging from it encased in an impenetrable suit of shining armor.

Beams of sunlight were reflecting from the chrome surface of the carapace, creating the bright glimmer Sunny had noticed. Massive but strangely elegant, the steel monster resembled a giant knight. Sunny was ready to swear that he had noticed the shapes of seven stars carved into its chest.

However, that knight was corrupted and evil. It radiated a sinister aura, like a demon summoned from hell to sow death and slaughter. The polished armor of the creature was covered with long, jagged spikes. Its humanoid torso had four mighty arms, two ending with powerful pincers, the other two — with razor-sharp, terrifying scythes.

The demon's head was more pronounced than that of a scavenger and crowned with several tall, sharp horns. Its metal face was almost human-like, but simultaneously repulsively monstrous and bestial. Just looking at it made Sunny's skin crawl.

'That thing... is scary.'

Whatever that creature was, its rank within the carapace legion was clearly higher than that of a centurion, not to mention of a lowly scavenger. It was the next step in their evolution. A general or a commander, perhaps. What were they called... legates? Praetorians?

Holding his breath, Sunny watched as the Carapace Demon descended from the Ashen Barrow. Stopping in front of the transcendent soul shard, it looked briefly at the kneeling centurion.

The deadly awakened monster shrank under its gaze, as if terrified of the larger Nightmare Creature. Sunny knew how it felt, since he did the same when the behemoth's eyes had briefly glided past his shadow's hiding place.

Not paying the centurion any attention, the Carapace Demon picked up the gleaming crystal and turned around. Then, it unhurriedly returned to the shade of the giant tree's branches.

Sunny slowly exhaled.

"Sunny? What is happening?"

He looked at Cassie, whose face was full of worry and curiosity. After hesitating for a little while, he said:

"There's a new threat. Stay quiet a bit longer, I'll explain later."

Back at the footsteps of the tall hill, the carapace centurion was finally ready to stand up again. Sunny was in a dilemma. He had to follow the monster to make sure that it doesn't stumble on their hiding place on its way back to the labyrinth.

However, he was also extremely curious to see what the Carapace Demon was up to in its lair on the top of the Ashen Barrow.

There was no time to think things through properly.

Making a hasty decision, Sunny sent his shadow sliding over the grey sand. It masterfully avoided the carapace centurion's eyes and was already climbing the tall hill a few seconds later.

'One look. I'll just take one look.'

Hiding in the deep shade cast by the majestic tree's scarlet crown, the shadow glided up the slope and approached the place where the Carapace Demon had disappeared from its sight.

On top of the hill, the ground was covered with fallen leaves. The Ashen Barrow was indeed larger than any high natural feature they had encountered before, vast and spacious as an actual island. However, the traces left behind by the massive creature's pillar-like legs could be easily seen.

They led the shadow to the center of the island, where the obsidian tree's enormous trunk was rising from the ground, with its broad roots stretching in all directions.

The Carapace Demon was standing beneath the tree, looking up at its lower branches. The transcendent shard was still clenched in its pincer.

'What is it looking at?'

Sunny made the shadow trace the creature's gaze and noticed several round, appetizing fruits hanging between the scarlet leaves. One of them looked especially ripe.

Suddenly, the demon dropped the soul shard into the sand and, completely forgetting about it, raised its body. It stretched a pincer up and gently grasped the fruit, then pulled on it.

Without any resistance, the fruit tore off the branch. Holding it as something fragile and extremely precious, the massive creature slowly lowered itself to the ground. Then, it carefully brought the fruit to its mouth and took a small bite.

'Its... eating fruits? This abomination is vegetarian?!'

Bewildered and not quite sure of what he had just seen, Sunny had no choice but to command his shadow to leave and hurry to the base of the hill.

The time was up, and if he wanted to catch up with the carapace centurion, he had to act with haste.

Gliding over the fallen leaves, the shadow descended from the Ashen Barrow and flew back in the direction of the labyrinth, soon catching up with the retreating monster.

'Phew.'

Feeling a lot of relief, Sunny made sure that the centurion's route would not put him on the collision course with the knoll they had been hiding behind and finally allowed himself to relax... slightly.

He waited until the scythe-wielding monster was completely gone before slowly rising back to his feet.

"It's safe to come out now."

Nephis and Cassie stood up, stretching and massaging their limbs. Suddenly remembering how tightly they were pressed against each other while hiding behind the knoll, Sunny just barely avoided turning red with embarrassment.

'That's... uh... was a necessary measure!'

He was almost glad that the Carapace Demon had appeared at the perfect moment to take his thought away from that situation.

"What happened?"

Nephis looked at him and raised an eyebrow. For once, her expression of indifference did not look very convincing.

Sunny glanced at the not-so-distant Ashen Barrow and shivered.

"There's danger ahead. We need to return to the Bone Ridge. I'll explain everything once we're safe and sound, back at the camp."

She opened her mouth to say something, but then thought better of it and remained silent, simply giving him a nod. The trust they had built was enough for that much, at least.

Sunny summoned the Echo, tied the golden rope around its torso, placed Cassie's makeshift saddle back on its carapace and helped the blind girl climb to her seat.

Picking up the saddlebags, he fixed them back onto the scavenger and took a step away. They were ready to go.

Before that, however, Sunny had one more thing to do. Coming close to the knoll, he used his hands to brush the sand off its surface.

Soon, the onyx black surface was revealed beneath. It was the same exact color as the bark of the colossal tree growing from the center of the Ashen Barrow.

The knoll was, in fact, just a small portion of one of the tree's giant roots, raised slightly above the ground in this part of the wasteland.

Sunny looked around, trying to calculate the size of this sea of ash. Finally, he was starting to understand what had drained all life from the giant patch of the crimson labyrinth.

Back inside the Bone Ridge, they were sitting around the fire. The delicious smell of roasting meat filled the air, making Sunny's stomach produce embarrassing sounds. However, it wasn't time to eat yet. He was in the middle of telling the girls about what he had seen.

"... after the centurion kneeled, another carapace creature came from the top of the Ashen Barrow. Only this one was not one of those we had seen before. It was easily twice the size of the centurion, six or seven meters tall. I can't even imagine how much it weighs. It looked like a moving house."

Nephis frowned, clearly not happy to know that there was such a behemoth barring their way.

"What's more, its carapace is not made of chitin. Instead, it looks like some strange metal alloy. I don't think we'll be able to cut through it. I also didn't notice any gaps in that monstrosity's armor, not even around the joints."

Cassie gulped, turning her head to her friend. Changing Star, however, remained silent.

Sunny sighed.

"In addition, that thing has four arms instead of the usual two, a pair with pincers and a pair with scythes. They're even bigger than the centurion's. Its carapace is littered with spikes, and it has long horns on its head. It also looks... uh... more human-like. It almost got a face, albeit an extremely ugly one. And its eyes... well, I think that it is more sentient than anything we had faced before."

Nephis was thoughtful. After a while, she said:

"It is probably an awakened demon."

Nightmare Creatures with one soul core were called "beasts", the ones with two cores were called "monsters". Three cores belonged to a class of creatures known as "demons", with "devils" right above them with four cores.

Sunny gave her a nod, indicating that he was in agreement with her conclusion.

"Or maybe a devil. In any case, I think we should avoid that scary bastard at all cost."

Changing Star stared at him, tilting her head a little. For a minute or so, there was only silence.

Sunny gritted his teeth, then sighed, then blinked a couple of times. Finally, he gave her a doomed, crooked smile.

"Let me guess. You want to kill it..."

Chapter 64: Pursued By Demons

"Let me guess. You want to kill it..."

Nephis continued to stare at him with her usual unreadable expression. After a while, Sunny chuckled and shook his head in disbelief.

"You really are crazy. That's... that's an awakened demon we're talking about, remember? Have you forgotten that we're just Sleepers?"

Then he frowned and scratched his head.

"W—wait a second. I feel like we already had this conversation before. Doesn't it feel familiar?"

Cassie glanced at the two of them and politely cleared her throat.

"Actually, you had said pretty much the exact same thing right before we decided to attack that first carapace centurion."

Sunny beamed.

"Yes! Exactly! And how did that end up? I almost got killed!"

Nephis shrugged indifferently.

"You survived, didn't you?"

He froze with his mouth open, too flabbergasted by the sheer audacity of her remark to answer immediately. A few seconds later, Sunny was finally able to speak again.

"That's not the point!"

Cassie gently touched her friend on the shoulder and whispered.

"Neph! That's not a very nice thing to say."

Changing Star's face flushed a little. Glancing aside, she hesitated and said:

"What I meant to say is... uh... we've won in the end, didn't we? It was a risk we had to take, and it paid off. We've grown stronger since then."

Sunny had a feeling that the fight against the Carapace Demon was already inevitable, but couldn't bring himself to stop protesting, solely out of principle.

"But that thing... it's huge! It's so tall you won't even be able to poke it with your sword! What are we going to do, ask the bastard politely to lower itself to our level?"

Neph frowned and looked at him with displeasure.

"It's just an..."

"...awakened demon, I know!"

Sunny sighed and shook his head again, feeling like he was talking to a stone wall.

Changing Star's mind was still a mystery to him. He had realized a long time ago that there was a deep dark well hidden behind her seemingly radiant exterior. No one pushed themselves that hard, endured that much, went that far unless they were being pursued by demons of their own... he knew that from experience.

And judging by how far ahead of everyone he had ever known Nephis was, her personal demons were especially dreadful. Much more dreadful than the terrifying Carapace Demon, at least. But although Sunny understood that she was running from something, he had no idea what destination she was so desperate to reach.

Just why was she so hellbent on finding that damned human castle, even more so than Sunny himself? His burning desire to come back to reality and rip all the rewards that the world owed him was so intense that it would

frighten most people to death. There were very few things that he wasn't willing to do to achieve his dream.

However, it only had meaning for as long as he stayed alive. Nephis, on the other hand, seemed to pursue a goal that held more meaning than her life. Why else would she be so willing to risk it? Sunny just couldn't understand that logic. It was irrational and paradoxical! What can be more important than your life? If you die, you won't be able to enjoy the fruits of your labor anyway.

He looked Nephis in the eyes and said:

"Back when we agreed to fight the carapace centurion, we did so because there was no other choice. We were literally stuck on a rock with it. What about now? Don't we have a choice to avoid the Ashen Barrow?"

She stared at him for a while and then simply said:

"That's the only way west."

Sunny laughed.

'That is the truth, I'll give you that.'

When his laughter died down, he wiped the corner of his eye and said:

"Alright. Alright. That makes sense. But believe me when I say it, as the only one who actually saw the Carapace Demon... we won't be able to defeat it in a fight."

Nephis scowled.

"Your point?"

Sunny spread his hands.

"Don't misunderstand. Yes, we can't defeat it. But..."

A dark smile appeared on his face.

"That doesn't mean that we can't kill it."

Changing Star thought about it, then raised an eyebrow and asked:

"You have a plan?"

Sunny shook his head.

"Not yet, not entirely. Let me sleep on it. However, there's one thing I know for sure."

He looked west, remembering the Carapace Demon's disturbing, bestial face. In the ensuing silence, Cassie turned her head to face him and asked with curiosity:

"What is it?"

Sunny blinked.

"Ah? Oh, yes. It's pretty simple, really. Unlike the scavengers and centurions, that thing appears to be rather intelligent. Which means that it can be deceived."

They spent another uneventful night inside the dead leviathan's spine. As far as their camps went, this one was probably the safest. There was a certain comfort in being surrounded by walls from all sides, even if they were made out of bone. Sleeping on top of cliffs and coral mounds, just meters away from the surface of the dark sea, exposed to elements, was not very restful.

Sunny even entertained the thought of suggesting to Nephis that they should stay here for a while, a few weeks, or even months if needed. They could slowly explore the surrounding areas, hunt monsters and grow stronger.

Then, after absorbing hundreds of soul shards and shadow fragments, armed with dozens of Memories and even a few more Echoes, perhaps, they could attack the Carapace Demon and be more sure of success.

However, he quickly realized that it was a bad idea. The Forgotten Shore was perilous and unpredictable. They were rather successful in conquering its dangers so far, but it was too easy for the situation to change. One moment of bad luck was enough to doom them.

One wrong turn, one unfortunate encounter, one more enemy than they were able to handle, and their lives would be over. And that was only in regard to the usual menagerie of abominable horrors they had to fight on the daily basis. The labyrinth hid much more terrifying secrets and existences, not to mention the unimaginable terrors of the deep dark sea.

Every additional day they spent here gave a chance for something fatal and unavoidable to happen. Their best hope of survival was to face the Carapace Demon as soon as possible.

Maybe after defeating it, they would finally be able to see the tall walls of the promised castle.

Sunny tossed and turned the whole night, thinking about the giant creature and trying to give shape to the nascent seed of the idea of how to kill it.

Close to the morning, he was finally able to fall asleep — only to be awakened by Cassie carefully shaking his shoulder half an hour later.

Sunny blinked, looking at the blind girl in confusion.

"What is it?"

She gestured to Nephis, asking her to come closer. Then, a little pale, she gathered her courage and said:

"I had another vision. A vision about the Carapace Demon..."

Chapter 65: Lights In The Darkness

Sunny was instantly wide awake. Sitting up, he hurriedly rubbed his eyes and then glanced at the blind girl, ready to listen.

Nephis approached them and sat down, her face barely visible in the dim light of the early dawn.

"Past or future?"

Sunny blinked.

'Right. I should have asked myself.'

Cassie thought for a bit and then hesitantly answered:

"Past... I think."

After a short pause, her expression changed to that of certainty.

"No, I'm sure of it."

Changing Star slightly tilted her head.

"That's good. So... what did you see?"

Cassie deeply inhaled and fell silent for several seconds, remembering. Her face paled a little, but this time, she was ready to face her fear.

"I saw the Ashen Barrow deep at night, enveloped in a raging storm. The winds were bending the branches of the great tree, as if desperate to break them. The island was illuminated by the constant barrage of thundering lightning bolts, with rain falling from the skies like a flood."

She paused, catching her breath, and continued:

"The Carapace Demon was there, standing in the middle of the storm like an unshakable fortress made of polished steel. Arcs of electricity were dancing between the spikes on his armor, but the demon did not pay it any attention. He was just as Sunny described... prideful, sinister and terrifying."

Cassie closed her eyes.

"When I looked into his eyes, I felt... a sense of emptiness and corruption. He observed the storm until it began to dissipate. The winds weakened, the rain stopped. The great tree stood unbroken, just as magnificent as it was before. But then, the last bolt of lightning fell from the sky and struck the ground beside it."

Sunny was listening to her tale with great attention, hopeful to hear a piece of useful information.

'So, that monstrosity is not afraid of lightning. Shame. With its metal carapace, I was almost tempted to try and lure it from under the tree during a storm.'

Apparently, that wouldn't work.

Meanwhile, Cassie was ready to carry on:

"That bolt of lightning could never hurt the Carapace Demon, let alone the miraculous tree. However, when it hit the ground, it ignited the fallen leaves that cover the Ashen Barrow's surface. Soon, a large part of the island was engulfed in fire. In the absolute darkness of the night, it shone like a beacon."

Sunny perked up, remembering something. Back when the three of them first met at the beginning of their deadly adventure through the Dream Realm, the girls mentioned that the light he had seen from the giant knight's statue a few nights prior was indeed made by them.

However, making that fire had turned out to be a big mistake. At night, any source of light was like a lure for the monsters of the Forgotten Shore...

including the terrifying creatures that lurked in the depths of the dark sea. That's why, ever since, they were careful to never light a fire after sunset, preferring to endure the darkness instead of attracting unknown horrors from beneath the waves.

Having a guess of what had happened next in Cassie's vision, he waited for the blind girl to continue. Her voice trembled a little.

"Before the flames died down, the dark sea surged, and a... a thing crawled out of it, covering almost the entire slope of the Ashen Barrow with its body. It looked like a... like a mass of bones and rotten flesh connected by black seaweed, with thousands of horrible eyes staring at me hungrily from beneath, coiling tentacles seething as it pushed itself toward the great tree."

Her face turned slightly green. Just remembering the abomination made Cassie feel nauseated, but she gritted her teeth and did not stop speaking.

"That was the most repulsive creature I've ever seen. However, it seemed slow and clumsy, as though being ashore, outside of the black water, was weakening it. The Carapace Demon did not hesitate to lunge at the creature, completely ignoring the fact that it was at least ten times his size. It was like... like he completely lost his mind, enraged by the intrusion on the island."

Nephis suddenly spoke:

"How did the demon survive?"

The blind girl hesitated.

"I... I don't know. I didn't see the battle itself, only its beginning and its end. At the break of dawn, the Carapace Demon crawled back into the shade of the great tree. He was severely wounded, with several of his legs missing and his scythes covered by a spiderweb of cracks. The fire was gone, and there was no sign of the sea creature anywhere in sight."

She paused for a moment and then said in a quiet voice:

"The most terrible wound was on his chest. The steel armor of the demon was fractured and split apart, revealing the beating heart inside. Rivers of azure blood were flowing from the wound, mixing with the ashen sand. The demon crawled to the base of the tree and laid his broken body between its roots."

Cassie sighed.

"The last thing I saw was the passage of time. I don't know how long it took, but eventually, the Carapace Demon was able to recover from his wounds. His scythes restored themselves, his legs grew back. The fracture on his chest was the last to heal. However, it wasn't healed completely. Hidden from sight, there's still a weakness in his armor."

Both Sunny and Nephis were silent for a long time, thinking.

Changing Star was the first to break the silence.

"So it's not impenetrable after all."

Then she looked at Sunny and asked:

"How's your plan coming along?"

He blinked, extricating himself from the swarm of thoughts. Glancing at his companions, Sunny smiled.

"Pretty well. I already had an inkling of how we should proceed, but Cassie's vision gave me additional inspiration."

Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"Is that so?"

He gave her a confident nod.

"Yeah. It's a wild idea, but it might just work. Well... maybe. In any case, it's going to be risky. And we'll have to make some preparations."

Both Cassie and Nephis looked at him expectantly. The blind girl cautiously asked.

"So... what's your plan? How are we going to deceive the demon?"

Sunny crossed his arms.

"It's not very complicated. Actually, I got the idea from that ancient fellow Neph likes to talk about. We're going to build..."

He took a dramatic pause, and then said with a mysterious smile:

"... a trojan ass."

However, their reaction was not what he had expected. Both girls blinked, then stared at him with complicated expressions. Well, Cassie did not stare, since she was blind, but her face was exactly the same as Changing Star's.

Strange.

"...A what now?"

Sunny scratched the back of his head, somewhat embarrassed, and cleared his throat.

"Uh... did I use the wrong word? I thought that Odysseus guy built a wooden animal? A... uh... donkey?"

Nephis raised a hand and put it on her forehead, closing her eyes.

'Weird. Does she have a headache?'

"Uh, are you alright?"

She sighed deeply, then said in a flat tone:

"A horse. It was a horse..."

The next day, they returned to the place of the battle between the carapace legion and the centipede monsters. A few days earlier, they had lured a carapace centurion here to ambush it, but ended up causing a massive confrontation between the two tribes of Nightmare Creatures.

The carcasses of some of the monsters were still there, buried slightly in the mud.

Of course, there was no meat left on their skeletons. The inhabitants of the labyrinth were for the most part carrion eaters, after all.

However, the three Sleepers were not interested in meat. They came for something else.

Stopping in front of the centurion's empty shell, cleaned of any flesh by some unknown beasts, he looked at the black and crimson carapace in satisfaction.

Nephis walked over and stood by his side, an unreadable expression on her face.

"Is this what you wanted?"

Sunny smiled.

"Yeah, exactly. I knew that nothing would be insane enough to chew on the chitin, but... in this place, you never know. I wasn't sure about its condition."

But the condition was good.

In fact, it was perfect.

Chapter 66: First Part Of The Plan

Close to the evening, with the sun tiredly descending toward the horizon, a strange creature walked out of the colorless remains of the labyrinth. If "walking" was even the right word.

Dragging its legs in the sand, the creature somehow floated forward without moving them. It looked like a carapace centurion, or at least a close approximation of one.

All the necessary parts were in place. The creature had a black carapace with a menacing crimson pattern on it, a humanoid torso, eight segmented legs and two arms ending with formidable bone scythes. However, all these parts looked mismatched and strange, as though put together by some clumsy sculptor.

Additionally, the centurion moved as if it was seriously drunk.

The carapace was careening to one side, sometimes scraping against the sand. The torso was swinging back and forth for no apparent reason. The scythes were awkwardly lodged behind the creature's back, crossed against each other at a strange angle.

At some point, one of them simply dropped to the ground. The centurion stopped and hesitated for a few seconds, as though unsure what to do. Then it left its scythe arm behind and continued on its way as if nothing had happened.

A perceptive observer would have noticed that the creature seemed to possess two shadows. The first shadow was as one would expect, its shape identical to the creature itself. The second one resembled a human. It briefly showed itself from beneath the larger shadow when the centurion abandoned the runaway limb.

The human shadow then proceeded to facepalm and shake its head in utter contempt.

The whole situation was nothing short of being completely bizarre. But, for better or worse, there was nobody around to notice the weird creature.

Unobstructed, it traversed the wasteland, moving in the direction of the Ashen Barrow. Soon, it was almost at the footstep of the tall hill.

The sunset was approaching.

The strange centurion plopped on the ground at the base of the Ashen Barrow and stopped moving completely. Awkward and lopsided, it looked like a parody of the other monster of its kind who had kneeled gracefully at the same spot a few days prior.

Additionally, it arrived without a tribute. There was no transcendent soul shard in sight. Added to the disrespectful pose, this transgression was more than enough to get the centurion killed.

Perhaps... it was suicidal.

On top of the barrow, the Carapace Demon moved and rose from the ashen sand. His shining armor glistened, reflecting the light of the setting sun. Encased in bright metal, with a crown of horns adorning his head, the demon looked fearsome and sinister. Gazing down, he lingered for a few moments.

Two dark scarlet embers ignited in the depths of the demon's eyes. Shifting his terrifying scythes, the giant monster walked forward, slowly descending from the hill to face the strange visitor.

The ground shook as he approached. However, the bizarre centurion did not even flinch. In fact, it remained completely motionless.

The Carapace Demon stopped some distance away from the suspicious creature. He observed it, clearly understanding that its pathetic appearance might be a trap. The labyrinth was full of unimaginable dangers. Rashly

approaching an unknown foe was not something an awakened demon, who possessed his own form of intelligence, would do.

At least that was what the three Sleepers had assumed.

However, they were wrong.

Just a second later, the Carapace Demon lunged forward. Its scythe flashed through the air, severing the centurion's torso in half. The adamantine chitin was cut apart as though it was made of butter. The upper half of the monster's torso flew off, revealing... only emptiness inside.

...On the other side of the Ashen Barrow, Sunny, who was running up the slope with all his might, cursed under his breath.

That was too soon!

He thought that they would have more time. Who knew that the Carapace Demon would turn out to be such a daredevil? He didn't even hesitate before going all out!

With Cassie riding piggyback on his back, Sunny gritted his teeth and tried to run even faster.

It was time to switch to plan B...

A moment later, the weird centurion's carapace came apart, setting the Echo that had been hiding underneath it free. Pushing the pieces of chitin away with its powerful pincers, the scavenger rushed toward the towering demon. It was aiming to duck underneath it and, hopefully, mess up the giant's legs.

The first part of Sunny's plan was rather simple. They were going to use the remains of a dead carapace centurion to disguise the Echo, which was much smaller in comparison, as one of the officers of the carapace legion.

Then, they would send it to the base of the Ashen Barrow to lure the demon away. The three of them were going to circle the hill and hide themselves under the grey sand in advance, then run up the slope and to the center of the island as soon as the demon had left.

The Echo was supposed to buy them enough time to climb the great tree and conceal themselves in its branches. Then, Sunny would dismiss the Echo, thus finishing the first stage of the plan. He never intended for the scavenger to actually fight the fearsome demon!

However, the Carapace Demon's unusually swift act of aggression had messed up the timing of the whole thing. The decoy was already destroyed, yet they weren't even halfway to the tree.

In this situation, there was no choice but to order the Echo to attack, hoping that it could stall the giant monster. That way, of course, Sunny was putting his scavenger at risk...

But there was no other choice.

Just as he was about to reach the crest of the hill, the Echo tried to hide itself beneath the Carapace Demon's massive body. It was doing the same thing that Nephis had done when fighting the first carapace centurion, intending to use the size of the enemy against it.

The difference was that this time, the smaller participant of the fight was clad in a sturdy carapace, as opposed to a squishy human girl who had no protection. Even if the demon tried to crush the scavenger with its weight, it wouldn't be able to kill it.

However, the demon understood it too.

Moving with incredible speed, he shifted his torso and struck out with a pincer. The scavenger was swatted away like an irritating insect, flying through the air and heavily crashing onto the ground. Its carapace had almost cracked.

Running toward the great tree, Sunny grimaced. He wanted to dismiss the Echo, but knew that it was too soon. They needed more time...

Ahead of him, Nephis was already approaching the enormous black trunk. Not wasting any time, she removed the seaweed rucksack from her back,

gently laid it on the ground, and began climbing, grabbing onto the cracks of the onyx bark.

Meanwhile, the Echo was shakily rising to its legs. A stubborn light was burning in its eyes. Producing a loud screech, it clacked its pincers in the air and once again rushed toward the demon.

'Go get him, buddy!' Sunny screamed inwardly, wishing his scavenger luck with all his heart.

The smaller creature bravely ran toward the steel behemoth, raising its pincers to attack. It was followed by two shadows — one bestial, the other one human.

Sunny was quickly shortening the distance to the great tree...

Below the hill, the Carapace Demon calmly stepped toward the rushing enemy. Its four arms moved in unison.

Suddenly, the scavenger's arms were sliced off. Its body was gripped in two giant pincers and raised into the air.

Sunny didn't even have time to react.

A fraction of a second later, the demon slightly strained its arms and tore the Echo in two, separating its torso from the carapace and crushing both halves into a bloody pulp.

On top of the hill, Sunny stumbled.

The familiar voice resounded like a tolling bell in his ears.

[Your Echo has been destroyed...]

Chapter 67: Racing Against Time

[Your Echo has been destroyed.]

Sunny stumbled and almost fell. Cassie gripped his shoulders tightly and leaned back a little, trying to help him keep balance. With fallen leaves flying from under his feet, Sunny somehow managed to catch himself in time.

'No!'

Anger and regret clouded his mind, but it was too late to do anything. His trusty scavenger was dead, sliced and torn apart by the giant creature. The ease and brutality with which the Carapace Demon had decimated the poor, brave beast would have been insulting... if it wasn't so terrifying.

It only took him a split second.

The Echo was gone. Not only had Sunny seen its tragic end through the eyes of his shadow, he also felt the subtle connection between them disappear. In his Soul Sea, one of the spheres of light shimmered and vanished, leaving the silent surface of the water a little bit darker. He had lost his most valuable possession.

But the bitterness Sunny felt was not only because of how useful the Echo had been, or how much money it could have brought him in the real world. He had actually grown to like the mindless scavenger quite a bit. It was big, loyal and reliable.

It even seemed to possess a strange sort of stubborn, offputting personality.

And now it was dead.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny ran like a madman. There would be time to mourn the loss of the loyal Echo later.

Right now, they had bigger problems.

"Sunny? What happened?"

Cassie's whisper sounded worried and tense. She must have felt the change in his mood through his posture and body language.

To be completely honest, Sunny was in no shape to talk. Running up the hill at top speed, with the blind girl on his back — no matter how delicate and light she was — had been a tall task for him without the support of the shadow. He was struggling to breathe, and there was still a considerable distance to the great tree. However, Sunny had to answer, his voice hoarse and rugged:

"He killed the Echo."

Then, there was no time for words anymore.

Because things were turning from bad to worse.

Down at the bottom of the hill, the Carapace Demon was standing above the mutilated remains of the scavenger, looking at them with contempt. Heavy drops of azure blood were falling from each of his four upper limbs.

Suddenly, the corpse of the Echo began to shine with soft light. Then, it shimmered and dissolved into a river of tiny sparks, which then fell to the ground and disappeared, leaving no trace of the hulking scavenger behind. Even its blood on the demon's scythes and pincers was gone.

After all, the Echo was just a manifestation of a slain Nightmare Creature and not the real thing. It came from nothing and was now returned to the state of nothingness.

However, the Carapace Demon was not looking at the unexpected light show. Instead, he was staring at one particular spot on the ground.

There, a lonely human shadow was frozen in confusion, uncertain what to do. With the body of the Echo — and consequently, its spacious shadow — gone, it was instantly revealed and had nowhere else to hide.

'Crap!'

The demon tilted his head, then moved with the speed of lightning and pierced the shadow with a scythe.

Sunny flinched, ready to experience blinding pain...

But nothing happened. The shadow, which had raised its hands in fright, looked down at the massive blade protruding from its chest and scratched its head.

It was completely fine.

Well, of course... it was just a shadow, after all. One had to have a body to be susceptible to such attacks.

'Right. What else did I think would happen?'

Meanwhile, the demon was staring at the nonchalant shadow. The menacing scarlet light in his eyes blazed brighter.

Sunny was getting closer to the trunk of the tree, temporarily fueled by adrenaline. Otherwise, he might have fainted from the strain already.

'Just... a little... more!'

They had every chance of making it. The shadow just had to distract the giant monster for a bit...

But it seemed as though luck was not on his side today. Down below, the Carapace Demon retrieved his scythe. However, instead of attacking the human shadow again, it suddenly turned around and cast a dark look at the top of the Ashen Barrow, where the giant tree stood in all its magnificent beauty.

The bastard was smart after all.

'Curse it all!'

Forgetting about the shadow, the behemoth lunged forward, rushing back up the tall hill's slope. It moved with frightening speed, covering a dozen

meters with each second.

'Get back here!' Sunny screamed to his shadow as he approached the trunk of the tree.

Helping Cassie climb down from his back, Sunny picked up the rucksack that Nephis had left behind and handed it to the blind girl.

"Be gentle with that."

Cassie nodded, well aware of the contents of the rucksack, and carefully hung it on her shoulder.

At that time, Changing Star had already reached the lowest branches of the great tree. Not wasting any time, she moved to a spot above her companions, summoned the golden rope and threw one of its ends down.

Catching the rope, Sunny quickly tied a loop and handed it to Cassie.

"You go up first."

The blind girl hesitated for a moment, then accepted it. Just as she was about to put her foot inside the loop, Sunny suddenly stopped her.

"Wait! Summon your staff."

The wooden staff that Cassie used to walk was actually a magical item capable of summoning strong winds. In their travels, they rarely had a cause to use it. But now it could come in handy.

Surprised and unsure of the reason, she nevertheless did as he had asked, summoning the Memory from her Sea of Soul. The wooden staff appeared in her hand.

Sunny lightly hugged the blind girl from behind and turned her body, guiding the hand holding the staff in the necessary direction. Then, he said:

"Now summon the wind."

In the next moment, a strong gale rose around them, blasting fallen leaves and ashen sand into the air. Instantly, a large portion of the island's surface was stripped bare.

More sand was revealed beneath.

Meanwhile, the shadow was racing against the Carapace Demon. The massive creature was already halfway up the hill, moving with the speed of a rushing train. The nimble shadow, however, was even faster. It had already overtaken the behemoth and was now flying forward, hurrying to return to its master.

"Good, now go!"

Sunny helped Cassie put her foot into the loop and stepped back, watching as Nephis pulled the rope up. She was going as fast as she could — which was really fast by human standards.

But was it fast enough?

Sweating, he counted seconds and waited. His life now depended on whether or not the rope would return before the demon arrives.

Every moment felt like an eternity.

He could already hear the distant, but quickly approaching sound of the Carapace Demon's eight towering legs stomping furiously through the sand.

Finally, Cassie was at the level of the giant tree's lower branches. Nephis helped her step out of the loop and settle on the wide surface of the branch, then threw the rope down again.

The demon was approaching the tree, still hidden from sight by its massive trunk.

The shadow slipped beneath Sunny's feet and wrapped itself around his body.

Catching the rope, Sunny practically flew up, climbing with incredible, adrenaline-fuelled speed. Landing on the branch beside the girls, he quickly turned around and tried to pull the rope up. The monster could not notice the golden shine of it... otherwise, it all would have been for nothing.

But there was less than a second left...

'Oh no!' Sunny thought, his heart skipping a beat.

But then Nephis simply dismissed the Memory, making the golden rope disappear into thin air.

The three of them crouched, hiding from sight, and held their breaths.

... A moment later, the furious mass of spikes and polished metal appeared beneath them. The Carapace Demon abruptly stopped, gazing around with his burning scarlet eyes. His pincers clicked, as if thirsty to tear flesh apart. The terrifying scythes were raised into the air, ready to slash and sever.

But there was nothing to kill underneath the great tree.

The demon lingered, looking right and left. Then he raised his head and looked up. Thankfully, the branch the three Sleepers were hiding on was very wide, more than enough to hide them from his sight. They remained motionless and silent, afraid to produce even the smallest of sounds.

After a while, the behemoth finally lowered his gaze and carefully observed the ground, looking for the traces of possible intruders.

However, the ground was clean and bare, all signs of their passage erased by Sunny with the help of Cassie's staff in advance. Not finding anything, the Carapace Demon had no choice but to walk away, moving on to explore other parts of the island.

Sunny was finally able to exhale.

Some distance away, the demon reached the edges of the area affected by the magical gale. There, he finally found two sets of footprints — one left behind by Nephis, the other one by Sunny.

With an angry roar that sounded like the clamor of tearing metal, the giant creature rushed down the slope of the Ashen Barrow, following the footprints to the wasteland beneath.

However, the grey desert was desolate and empty, with no living creature in sight. It was colored crimson by the setting sun.

At that moment, the ground shook slightly, and a thunderous rumble resounded throughout the labyrinth, bringing with it chilling wind and the smell of salt.

The dark sea was returning.

Throwing one last hateful gaze toward the wasteland, the Carapace Demon turned around and slowly headed back to the top of his barrow.

Chapter 68: Beacon Of Death

Sunny, Nephis and Cassie sat on a branch of the great tree, waiting for the sun to set. The branch was wide enough to accommodate twice as many people, so they weren't worried about being spotted from the ground. Still, they remained silent and motionless, wary of the giant monster that sometimes appeared beneath their hiding place.

The sound of his footsteps sent shivers through the tense bodies of the three Sleepers.

Not once since coming to the Forgotten Shore had Sunny hoped for the night to come faster. But there was a first time for everything.

They could only proceed with the next step of the plan after darkness had fallen, so there was nothing to do now but wait. Sitting with his back against Neph and Cassie, Sunny stared into the distance and tried not to think about anything.

Obsessing over past mistakes and future risks was only going to dampen his resolve. And it was already in short supply.

Meeting a setback so early into the plan really threw Sunny off his game. He still couldn't recover from the sudden loss of the precious Echo. Of course, he knew beforehand that many things could go wrong... in fact, he had even warned the girls that there were too many unpredictable elements, and thus it was impossible to reliably predict their chances of success.

Nevertheless, he had not expected to lose the strongest member of their group at the very beginning. The first stage of the plan was supposed to be the safest. Things to come were going to be much more dangerous.

Sunny looked at the darkening skies, barely visible through the thick canopy of the great tree's crown, and listened to the noise of the rising sea. In the dim twilight, Cassie shifted a little and then gently squeezed his hand.

Her warm touch made Sunny tense up, but then, realizing that the blind girl was just trying to console him, he allowed himself to relax.

'Stupid. What am I, a kid? Holding hands will not solve anything.'

But, despite these grumbling thoughts, Sunny reluctantly realized that he did feel a bit reassured, with no logical reason at all.

Maybe they were going to pull this off after all.

If this was their will... who dared to stop them?

Soon, the night descended, drowning the world in absolute darkness.

The Ashen Barrow had become an island in the black, undulating void of the dark sea. The branches of the great tree swayed gently in the darkness, their vibrant scarlet leaves now indistinguishable from the obsidian surface of the wood. The leaves whispered and rustled, creating a calming melody in the threatening murmur of the surging waves.

Sunny sighed, knowing that the moment of truth was approaching. He was sure of his plan... as far as it was possible to be sure of anything in this cursed place. But he also knew all the risks and all the things that could go wrong.

At the end of it all, they were still tossing a coin, hoping that its fall was not going to spell their doom.

He felt Neph's position shift. She turned her head and glanced in his direction, a calm expression on her face. Today, her inexplicable ability to remain composed in any situation, no matter how dire, was especially frustrating.

Even though Changing Star could not see anything in the pitch-black darkness of the Starless Void, she knew that he would notice her questioning look.

Sunny closed his eyes, then opened them again and slowly exhaled.

"Let's begin."

The three of them moved, performing a rehearsed set of motions. Cassie carefully shifted to the side, giving Sunny and Nephis space to do what needed to be done. Sunny gently placed the seaweed rucksack between himself and Neph, then opened it.

His motions were slow and cautious.

Inside the rucksack, two large clay containers lay surrounded by several layers of soft seaweed fiber. These jars were made by Sunny himself, and as such were not particularly sturdy. After all, he wasn't a craftsman — all his knowledge about pottery was received in a single day of listening to Teacher Julius's rants about the importance of clay in the development of human civilization.

Still, he at least remembered the basics.

Inside the jars, all the oil they had gathered from the centipede monsters splashed around, making Sunny's heartbeat unsteady. A centipede monster had two sacks in its body, each containing a different oily substance. When mixed, these substances produced an incredibly corrosive, deadly oil that could eat through a scavenger's carapace in seconds.

It was also highly flammable.

The jars contained the two components of the centipede oil. If they were to break during their run to the great tree, allowing the components to mix... well, there was a reason why the rucksack was entrusted to Nephis while Sunny carried Cassie despite his inferior physical endurance.

The centipede oil was the centerpiece of his plan.

Placing the clay jars on the branch, Sunny took out one last thing from the rucksack. It was a makeshift torch made out of bone and... yeah, more

seaweed. Traditionally, torches were supposed to be made out of wood, but on the Forbidden Shore, bones were much more easily found than sticks.

In the darkness, he found Neph's cool hand, took it into his own and then placed the torch on her open palm.

At that moment, Sunny couldn't help but remember the other times Changing Star's hands had touched his body. The first time was when he was dying, his chest crushed by the carapace centurion's bone scythe. The other time was on the day he handed her the Starlight Legion Armor and learned about her cruel Flaw.

Both days were very memorable, although for different reasons.

He had a feeling that this day was also going to be forever etched in his memory... provided they live to see the morning.

Sunny deeply inhaled.

"I'm ready."

Nephis nodded and then rose to her feet. Standing tall, she grasped the torch and closed her eyes, as though praying. Clad in white armor, with her silver hair dancing in the wind, she looked like a beautiful, solemn angel.

Then, white radiance ignited beneath her eyelids. In the next moment, bright fire burst from beneath her hands, igniting the top of the torch. Changing Star opened her eyes, extinguishing the light shining in them, and raised the torch high above her head.

In the lightless world, this single small flame looked like a lonely star drowning in the sea of darkness.

Simultaneously, Sunny stepped to the edge of the branch, inhaled deeply... and screamed at the top of his lungs.

"HEY, ASSHOLE! COME GET ME IF YOU DARE!"

Then, all hell broke loose.

Attracted by the sudden burst of light and Sunny's belligerent cries, the Carapace Demon appeared out of nowhere in a storm of fury. Its towering legs tore through the ashen sand, throwing clouds of it into the air. Two scarlet eyes immediately focused on the shouting human, sending a nervous shiver through Sunny's legs.

"Yeah, right here, you pile of scrap! Come and get it, fat lobster! This is my island now!" he shouted, pretending to not be scared out of his wits.

The demon dashed toward him. This behemoth was as tall as a house, but still not tall enough to reach the branches of the great tree with his scythes. So, for the moment, Sunny was still safe.

He was pretty sure that this won't be the case for long, but it was enough time to bring the plan to fruition.

If he doesn't miss...

Just as the Carapace Demon was about to appear right beneath the branch Sunny was standing on, he took a deep breath, aimed, and tossed both of the jars down.

The creature reacted with lightning speed, slicing both jars into pieces with his horrible scythes. However, it was of no use: the oily liquids contained inside still rained on its carapace in a torrent, followed by a scattering of clay shards.

If anything, it only made the surface of the impact larger, covering most of the demon's metal carapace in a layer of liquid.

The two components mixed, producing the deadly corrosive oil, which then burned into the lustrous armor. Sunny held his breath.

... However, the centipede monster's oil, which was capable of destroying the unbreakable chitin of both scavengers and centurions, turned out to be

completely ineffective against the strange alloy covering the Carapace Demon's body. It didn't even leave a scratch on it.

Sunny's face darkened.

'That's...'

Nephis silently appeared by his side, raising an arm.

'... just as I expected.'

Luckily, Sunny did not put a lot of value on the oil's corrosive qualities, to begin with.

He needed the oil for its other quality.

Its flammability.

Guided by the loud sounds produced by the massive monster, Nephis moved and threw the torch down with a powerful swing of her arm. Spinning, the torch streaked through the air like a meteor and landed right in the middle of the demon's carapace.

... In the next second, the giant creature was engulfed in flames.

Sunny did not really expect the fire to be able to damage the demon. He was sure that the behemoth could withstand much more than just simple heat.

But now, covered in the burning oil, the Carapace Demon shined brightly in the pitch-black night of the Forgotten Shore.

He had turned into a fiery beacon, calling all the monsters of the cursed dark sea to come crawling from its black depths.

Chapter 69: The Guest | Shadow Slave

The giant demon was engulfed in flames, shining like a bright beacon in the hungry darkness of the night. His polished armor blazed with reflected light, sending radiant glints in all directions. Drops of burning oil were falling to the ground, flaring up as they hit the ashen sand.

For a second, it seemed as though time had stopped. Sunny was staring at the incandescent glow of the fire, his eyes wide, almost failing to believe that they had actually pulled this insanity off. Nephis was frozen by his side, her hand still outstretched after the throw.

But they really did, they pulled it off. Sunny never seriously considered facing the Carapace Demon in an honest battle... if a battle between a giant death machine and three powerless humans could even be called honest. However, their lacking strength did not mean that they could not murder the evil creature.

They just had to be smart about how to do it. For example, they could find something stronger to do the dirty work for them...

That's why he had concocted a plan to sneak onto the Ashen Barrow, wait for the night to come, lit the behemoth aflame and watch it be torn apart by the terrifying monsters of the dark sea.

And now they were halfway to making that plan a reality.

Of course, the most dangerous part was yet to come — they still had to survive the attack of the creatures of the black water themselves. And before that...

The Carapace Demon roared with fury, making Sunny feel like his ears were going to bleed. The roar sounded like a deafening cacophony of rusted metal being torn apart by giant claws. Two scarlet eyes shone through the conflagration of flames, piercing the young man with a concentrated beam of murderous hatred.

...Before that, they had to last until the sea monsters arrive.

The infuriated demon was out for their blood, and no one knew how much time it would take for the dark sea creatures to appear on the Ashen Barrow. Sunny was scared that the demon was capable of performing ranged attacks. If not, he might be able to climb the tree to get to them, or try to kill them in a way that they had not even considered. In the worst-case scenario, they would have to endure his rage for quite a while.

Looking into the giant's hateful eyes, he sensed that the creature was thinking in the same direction. When the demon glanced in the direction of the great tree's obsidian trunk, Sunny's heart suddenly skipped a bit.

However, in the end, cold rationality won over seething rage in the Carapace Demon's mind. Instead of wasting time trying to get to the three tiny humans, he suddenly rolled on the ground, hoping to use the sand to douse the flames dancing on his carapace.

The whole island shook, almost throwing Sunny off the branch.

'Crap.'

Why did the bastard have to be so smart?

For a moment, Sunny entertained the idea that the demon was actually going to succeed in extinguishing the fire before the dwellers of the depths had noticed it.

But he didn't have to worry.

Suddenly, Nephis turned to face the dark surface of the sea. Her face paled slightly. Sunny was a second late to react, but almost instantly, he too felt a strange change in the world around them.

It was hard to describe with words. The rustle of the scarlet leaves suddenly felt quieter, the sound of the waves crashing against the shores of the ashen island louder. It was as though some invisible pressure descended on the world, making everything feel slightly different.

Then, the air became colder, and a wall of thick fog appeared above the dark waters.

The Carapace Demon had also noticed this change. He stopped trying to douse the flames and rose from the sand, the oil still burning on his carapace. Not paying it any attention anymore, the demon turned to the sea, a sense of grim resignation radiating from his posture.

Then, it was replaced by dark resolve and frenzied bloodlust.

The fog slowly moved, crawling onto the island. Sunny felt shivers run down his spine, realizing that it was flowing against the wind. The sound of waves was now muffled and changed, almost imperceptibly so.

And there, in the fog, something was moving. He could almost make out a figure.

It was... it was...

Suddenly, Cassie's small palm covered his eyes. With her voice trembling with tension, she whispered:

"Don't look. No matter what happens, don't open your eyes."

Sunny froze, obediently shutting his eyes. A cold sense of fright wrapped itself around his heart. He had never heard the blind girl's voice sound like this before, not even when she was recalling her terrifying visions.

Cassie slowly removed her hand. Blinded, he could only rely on his hearing...

At least that was what he thought until the cold fog touched his skin. Then, in the muffled silence, he heard Cassie's voice again.

Only this time, it was distorted and coming from the wrong direction.

"Don't look... don't look... don't look..."

Sunny gulped, feeling his hair stand on end. The sound of the blind girl's distorted voice echoed in the fog, surrounding him from all sides. Instead of growing quieter, it was becoming louder, overlapping over itself.

"Don't look, don't look, don't look, don't look!"

Then, it grew even louder still and turned into a cacophony of screams, crashing into Sunny like a wave, sounding nothing like what human vocal cords could ever produce:

"DON'T LOOK DON'T LOOK DON'T LOOK DON'T!!!"

Sunny stood paralyzed, stunned by the onslaught of inhuman shrieks. All he could do was try not to fall to his knees. And then, when his resilience was almost broken...

Everything suddenly stopped. The abrupt silence enveloped the world, making him exhale with relief. It was over.

A few seconds later, Cassie whispered into his ear:

"Open your eyes."

After hearing the clear sound of her voice, Sunny was about to do as she told...

Then he stopped.

Her voice did not sound terrifying and distorted. It was just as usual, sweet and melodic. It even came from the right direction. But... but something about it was wrong.

'Wh—what...'

He lingered, keeping his eyes closed.

Why was it so calm? Why didn't he feel the warmth of her breath as she leaned close to whisper into his ear?

And how... how could she lean... if he was taller?

Sunny froze, afraid to even breathe. Cassie's clear, familiar voice repeated:

"Open your eyes... open..."

Then, mere centimeters away, it exploded with cold, malevolent authority:

"OPEN YOUR EYES!"

But he didn't.

A second passed, then another, then one more. Each of them felt like an eternity. Sunny trembled, practically feeling his body aging. Finally, the voice returned. But this time, it felt as though it was further away, withdrawing.

"No matter... no matter..."

Soon, he was able to hear the rustling of leaves and the sound of waves again. He could also hear Cassie and Neph breathing ruggedly beside him. It seemed that they were also assaulted by the terrifying mimic.

And also...

Somewhere beneath them, the Carapace Demon roared and hit his scythes against each other. The loud clamor of steel resounded beneath the great tree, sending an almost palpable wave in all directions. This wave seemed to expel the unnatural fog, creating an enormous sphere of clean air.

Sunny still kept his eyes shut.

In the next moment, the whole island trembled as the demon clashed with the unknown horror that had been hiding in the fog. Something shattered with a deafening thunder, and the ground shook again, causing the branches of the great tree to sway.

With his hands trembling, Sunny outstretched them and grabbed onto his companions, drawing them close. Holding each other, they listened to the

sounds of the furious battle and waited.

An eternity later, the fight between the Carapace Demon and the guest from the depths was over. Silence had returned to the Ashen Barrow once again.

Sunny had long ago lost the track of time and grew desensitized to the tremors running through the great tree each time the two monsters clashed. Sudden stillness gave him a start. With a slight shudder, he turned his head and listened, trying to discern what was happening.

In the quiet aftermath of the terrible battle, Nephis hesitated and then said in a raspy voice:

"We can open our eyes now."

Sunny lingered before following her advice. He opened his eyes and blinked a couple of times, his vision slowly returning.

The pale light of dawn was creeping from the east, enveloping the island in the dim twilight. Beneath them, the surface of the island was torn apart and upturned, almost unrecognizable. It was as though the Ashen Barrow was pummeled by several rounds of heavy artillery fire.

And on that surface...

'Damn it!'

The Carapace Demon was slowly limping back from the edges of the island, leaving a trail of azure blood behind. He was heavily wounded and in a terrible shape, with several limbs missing and a spiderweb of cracks covering his once pristine carapace.

Two of his arms were gone, leaving him with a single scythe and a single pincer. Most of his rear legs were either broken or severed, forcing the behemoth to walk in a strange, unsteady gait.

However, he was still alive. More than that, none of the armor plates covering his vital organs were seriously damaged, his metal shell still strong and impenetrable.

Sunny clenched his fists and glanced at Neph, a dark expression on his face.

"What... what do we do?"

Changing Star looked down. There was a cold glint in her calm, grey eyes.

Stretching her arm to the side, she summoned her sword and said:

"Finish him off."

Chapter 70: Judgement Of The Blade

Sunny looked at the wounded demon, a grim look of resolve on his face.

At this point, there was no reason to argue. They had no other choice but to face the guardian of the island themselves. Sunny's bag of tricks was all empty anyway — in the end, their fates were still going to be decided by sharp blades.

Someone was going to get killed, and someone was going to be the killer.

"How are we going to deal with his armor?"

Nephis weighed the sword in her hand and glanced down.

"I will break through the armor. Can you create an opening?"

Sunny nodded, not wasting time on unnecessary questions. If Changing Star was certain of her ability to cut through the demon's carapace, he had no reason to doubt it.

Creating an opening... that was not going to be easy. Even though the monster had suffered terrible injuries, he was still a force to be reckoned with. His size alone was going to pose difficulties. They would have to bring the behemoth down to his knees before even thinking of carrying out any sort of an effective attack.

And he was not just going to stand still under their assault, either.

But what else was there to do?

While Nephis was tying the golden rope to the branch, Sunny walked over to Cassie and lightly squeezed her shoulder.

She tried to force a smile.

"I take it that the Carapace Demon is still alive?"

Despite the heavy, cold, dark feeling gripping his heart, Sunny tried to make his voice sound relaxed and carefree.

"Yeah, but just barely. Don't worry too much. This whole thing will be over in no time."

'One way or another,' he added inwardly.

Cassie's smile weakened. She was clearly not convinced by his clumsy attempt to reassure her.

Sunny hesitated.

"Hey. Have you ever eaten demon meat?"

The blind girl was clearly surprised by his question.

"What? No."

Sunny grinned.

"How about a demon steak? I'm an excellent cook, I'll have you know. Uh... I think. Neph had sort of monopolized the preparation of food, so I had no chance to put all the knowledge from the Wilderness Survival course to practice."

Teacher Julius had indeed spent a lot of time teaching him how to cook all kinds of seemingly inedible things, as well as meats of all sorts of Nightmare Creatures, in preparation for his journey into the Dream Realm. Here, hunger was as much of an enemy as the fiercest of monsters.

"As soon as we get our hands on some demon meat, I'll make you a steak. It'll be the most delicious demon steak you had ever eaten... I promise!"

Finally, a real smile appeared on Cassie's face. She gave him a courteous nod.

"Alright. That's a promise then."

Meanwhile, Nephis was done with the rope. She threw it down without hesitation and glanced at him.

"Are you ready?"

Sunny sighed and close his eyes for a second, feeling the strength of his body being enhanced by the shadow.

"Yes. Let's do this."

As soon as their feet touched the ground, Sunny felt a heavy gaze burning a hole in his chest. Glancing up, he saw the crippled Carapace Demon staring right at him, a dark glint shining in his one remaining eye.

The other one was gone, leaving only a bleeding black gap behind.

At this distance, the damage dealt to the demon's body seemed even more debilitating. Its carapace was fractured in several places and covered in cracks, each seeping with azure blood... sadly, none of the cracks were near the vital organs. His horns were shattered, as was one of his front legs — in addition to several rear ones that were either broken or torn off completely.

The stumps of his two severed arms were pressed tight against his torso to stem the heavy bleeding. The other two were hanging to the ground, almost brushing against the ashen sand.

The giant monster looked broken and tired. However, it was still terrifying, perhaps even more so than before. Because, despite the horrible wounds, his gaze was still firm and full of evil intelligence. It was still radiating madness and bloodlust.

Which was now concentrated on Sunny and Nephis — the architects of his sorry state.

The first beams of the rising sun shone on the spikes covering the demon's once lustrous carapace, painting them in shades of burning crimson.

Sunny summoned the Azure Blade and glanced at Nephis.

"Be careful. He's lightning fast."

He was the only one who had seen the terrible creature in action. As such, only he knew how dangerous the demon really was.

Nephis nodded, not taking her eyes off the enemy, and stepped forward.

The two of them walked toward the waiting Carapace Demon. Sunny was slightly ahead and aiming to circle the behemoth from the right — the side where the demon had both his last remaining scythe and eye.

Changing Star was a step or two behind him, aiming to circle the creature from the left — the side where his pincer arm was slowly rising into the air.

In this battle, Sunny's role was to take the brunt of the enemy's attacks, letting his partner deal the lethal blow when the time was right. Through the tacit understanding that they had developed through surviving dozens of life or death situations, the two of them were able to cooperate without speaking a single word, fighting almost as one.

This was their main advantage.

As they were closing in, Sunny felt a slight shift in the demon's posture. Instantly, he knew that hell was about to break loose.

He had warned Nephis about the speed of their enemy, but he also had to deal with it himself. Sunny knew that he was much slower than the giant creature, but he still had to find a way to dodge the massive, terrifying scythe.

That wasn't as bad as it seemed. Speed wasn't everything in a fight. Take, for example, Changing Star's training fight against the proud scion of the Han Li clan. Caster possessed an Aspect Ability that made him ten times faster than the silver-haired girl — at least. However, in the end, he only won by a hair's breadth. Nephis had almost smashed his face with an unexpected elbow strike.

She had been able to catch Caster unaware not because of her fast reaction — with that big of a difference between their speeds, no amount of reaction could have helped her. Instead, she was able to predict and manipulate the opponent's attacks, starting the strike even before Caster himself knew that he was going to end up in the path of her elbow.

She was in control of the battlefield.

And now, they had to repeat that feat against the ancient demon of the Forgotten Shore. Luckily, his speed advantage was not nearly as insane as Caster's.

Almost simultaneously, Sunny and Nephis lunged forward, attacking the behemoth from different sides. He also moved, ready to tear them apart. Both his pincer and his scythe rose into the air.

Sunny was running as fast as he could, the Azure Blade outstretched behind him. A fire of cold resolve was burning in his heart.

He was ready to live or die by his blade.

However, in the next moment, his leg seemed to slip in the sand, and as his eyes opened wide, Sunny stumbled.

Not wasting the opportunity, the Carapace Demon attacked. The terrifying scythe tore through the air, aiming to cut the helpless human in half...

But it hit only sand.

Sunny, who had feigned his loss of balance to bait the demon's strike, easily avoided the deadly blade by jumping to the side at the last second.

He wasn't quite at the level where he could predict every move of the enemy. Instead, manipulating the enemy into performing a predictable attack was easier.

After all, deceit and manipulation were his forte.

Temporarily safe from the threat of the scythe, Sunny dashed toward the demon's legs.

At the same time, Nephis had managed to avoid the massive pincer and was closing in on them, too. They reached their goals almost simultaneously, one from the right, the other from the left.

Sunny slashed with the Azure Blade, feeling it hit the polished armor and bounce back without leaving even a slight scratch on it. Dull pain radiated through his hands.

On the other side of the behemoth's massive body, Nephis achieved more success. She had attacked the already injured front leg of the monster, cutting deep into his flesh through the wide crack in the metal plate. Severely damaged, the leg wasn't able to support the weight of the giant creature anymore. It buckled, sending the demon reeling.

At this point, a scavenger or a centurion would have lost their balance and fallen to the ground. However, the Carapace Demon was too smart and experienced. He compensated for the loss of another leg by shifting his body weight to the opposite side and thrusting his scythe into the ground to remain stable.

'Damn it!'

Sunny had really hoped that the bastard would fall down.

Because then he wouldn't have had to do what he was about to do next.

But now there was no other choice.

Cursing inwardly, Sunny briefly looked up at the massive body of the giant demon. Heavens only knew how much that thing weighed.

Then, he held his breath and ducked right beneath the Carapace Demon's steel abdomen.

Chapter 71: One Small Mistake

With the Carapace Demon using his deadly scythe to support the weight of his body, Sunny was temporarily safe from its sharp blade. Of course, the monster had other means of attack. Each one of his towering legs was like a siege ram, dangerous and capable of devastating destruction.

But at the moment, his position was too precarious to lash out with them. Sunny had at least a second to do whatever he wished to, with no risk involved.

The only thing he had to avoid was going directly under the behemoth, thus putting himself in danger of being crushed to death by the demon's giant body.

Coincidentally, that was exactly what he had to do.

'Crap, crap, crap!'

Glancing up at the massive armored creature, Sunny cursed and dashed forward. A moment later, he dove underneath the Carapace Demon, feeling the thick shadows swallow him whole.

Instantly, Sunny was covered in cold sweat. There was nothing but polished metal and murderous intent above him now. All the monster had to do to turn the tiny human into a puddle of blood was to rest his body on the sand.

Under the crushing weight, Sunny's organs would burst and his bones would turn to dust. There wouldn't be anything solid left of him at all, only a thin layer of bloody goo smeared across the ground.

Not the best situation to find yourself in.

With his nerves on the verge of melting, Sunny brandished his sword and rushed forward. His eyes were glued to the joints of Carapace Demon's legs. He was utterly focused, looking for the slightest movement. Waiting for it.

With no room for error, Sunny pushed every unnecessary thought and emotion into the farthest corner of his mind, not allowing dread, doubt and his tendency to overthink things to slow him down even by a fraction of a second.

Time moved excruciatingly slowly. It felt as though hours had passed, but in reality, it was only a couple of moments. Sunny was only at the second pair of the giant monster's legs.

It was then that he finally noticed the almost imperceptible change in the demon's posture. The tension in his joint changed slightly, indicating that the behemoth was about to move.

This was the sign that Sunny was both hoping for and terrified of. Now, his survival was wholly dependent on whether or not he was fast enough.

As soon as his eyes had registered the change in the creature's posture, Sunny pivoted on one leg and dashed to the side, trying to get away from underneath the armored giant. A small cloud of sand was sent flying by his sudden turn.

But the demon was incredibly fast. He threw his body down, determined to squash the odious invader like a bug. With inertia and the limits of his human body slowing Sunny down, he felt the metal surface of the carapace begin to fall down on his head long before reaching the safe zone.

Death was approaching with abhorrent speed.

One step, two... was he going to make it in time?!

The Carapace Demon fell to the ground with a thunderous crash, sending large clouds of sand into the air. The impact was so strong that the whole island trembled.

The furious mass of falling metal and spikes missed Sunny by just a few centimeters. He flew from underneath the demon's body at the last possible moment by performing a desperate dive.

Crushing into the sand, Sunny rolled away and jumped back to his feet, slightly disoriented by the shockwave of the giant's fall.

'Huh... I actually managed to survive.'

Sometimes, life was full of surprises.

But, all jokes aside, he was not really astonished. His actions, while potentially fatal, had been deliberate and calculated. He was not in the habit of putting his life at risk without being sure that there would be at least a moderate chance of making it out alive.

His actions were also always purposeful and pursued a specific goal.

In this case, it was to bring the Carapace Demon down.

Only by forcing the giant creature down to the ground, in reach of their blades, could they hope to kill it.

In that sense, this dangerous gamble ended in resounding success. The bastard was now lying on his abdomen, his carapace and humanoid torso, where all the vital organs were situated, well in the Changing Star's attack range.

Now Sunny just had to create an opening for her to deal the fatal blow... although he still had no idea about how she was planning to bypass the impenetrable barrier of the demon's armor.

However, creating that opening was not going to be a trivial task. Despite the fact that the monster's mobility was now severely reduced, the distance between him and the two Sleepers was also much smaller. Which made dodging his attacks that much harder.

Sunny was about to experience that hardship for himself.

He was barely back on his feet when the terrifying scythe flashed through the air, threatening to slice his body in half. Sunny had no idea how Nephis was doing on the other side of the creature's enormous body against the pincer, but dealing with the scythe was almost beyond his abilities.

The burning eye of the demon that followed his every move was not helping the situation at all.

With very little time to react, Sunny did the only thing he could think of — he jumped as high as he could and pulled his legs up to his chest, performing a very awkward forward somersault.

Because of the number of shadow fragments he had consumed and the physical enhancement brought by the shadow, the height of his jump was nothing short of impressive, by human standards. The scythe's blade whistled beneath Sunny, so close that he could feel the wind brushing against his face.

Landing on the ground, he dashed forward. Sunny knew that the scythe would come back, but he had a second or two to change his position, getting in front of the behemoth.

He had to make the giant creature forget about Nephis completely and concentrate fully on dealing with him, and him alone. To do that, he had to get in range of both the scythe and the pincer.

What a lovely task!

Feeling that his time was running out, Sunny spun around and raised the Azure Blade.

Just as he thought, the Carapace Demon was already bringing the scythe down at him again, this time in a ruthless horizontal thrust. The sharp tip of the scythe was flying through the air, aimed at his chest.

However, he had slightly underestimated the demon's reaction time. As the result, there was already no time to dodge.

One small mistake was the difference between life and death on the Forgotten Shore.

The scene of their first fight against a carapace centurion flashed in Sunny's mind. The situation was eerily similar to this one, with the inescapable

doom approaching him at the speed of lightning, too swift and close to be avoided.

Brought by the blade of a carapace creatures's scythe.

But Sunny wasn't the same as he was before. Since that fateful battle, he had spent every day training, gaining experience and gathering power. He had fought his way through this hell, paying a price of blood for every step.

He wasn't that easy to kill anymore.

Instead of soft flesh, the scythe was met by the hard steel of the Azure Blade. Not only did Sunny block the blow, he even managed to angle the sword in a way that would deflect most of the impact instead of absorbing the full force of it.

One of his hands was placed on the hilt, the other gripped the tip of the blade with enough strength to prevent the edge from cutting his fingers off.

The residual force was still enough to send him flying back... but it was not enough to break the bones in his hands. Not with the shadow enhancing the resilience of his body.

...The Azure Blade, however, was not as lucky.

With a sorrowful ring, the blade shattered, breaking off near the crossguard. Beautiful shards of blue steel fell to the ground.

Sunny gritted his teeth, knowing what would happen next.

The Spell spoke, announcing the destruction of his trusty sword.

[Your Memory has been...]

He didn't get to hear the rest of the sentence, because, in the next moment, his body collided with the ground. Sunny bounced a couple of times, feeling flashes of pain radiating through his bones, rolled, and finally came to a stop.

He was comparatively fine.

Standing up, Sunny stumbled and barely managed to remain on his feet. He glanced around and noticed that the trunk of the great tree was not that far away.

Two dozen meters away, the Carapace Demon was slowly turning his head, planning to concentrate his murderous rage on Nephis. This was the exact opposite of what Sunny had to achieve.

He had to attract the monster's attention somehow.

But what could he do?

As the remains of the Azure Blade began to shine with soft light in his hand, ready to disintegrate into a rain of sparks, Sunny raised his hand and threw the broken sword with as much force as he could gather.

However, he didn't throw it at the demon.

Instead, he threw it at the miraculous tree, as though trying to harm it.

Not far away, the demon suddenly froze, even if only for a second. His scarlet eye followed the shining Memory as it flew through the air, approaching the trunk of the great tree.

Then the broken sword fell apart, turning into a shower of white sparks, which then disappeared without a trace. None of them even touched the obsidian bark.

However, the Azure Blade had already fulfilled its purpose.

It distracted the giant for a few precious moments.

For Changing Star, that was more than enough.

Chapter 72: Demon Slayers | Shadow Slave

As soon as the Carapace Demon froze, distracted by the feigned threat to the great tree, Nephis lunged forward. There was no hesitation, no doubt, not even the slightest pause between the moment her enemy had lowered his defenses and her reckless attack.

Just like Sunny had been utterly focused on observing the monster's movements before, she had been watching and waiting for this exact moment since the beginning of the battle. Changing Star knew that, when the opportunity presents itself, it will only last for a second.

Even that single second almost cost Sunny his life. Nephis wasn't going to waste it.

Her graceful figure flew through the air like an arrow released from a powerful bow, almost leaving afterimages behind. The silver blade of her longsword glimmered, reflecting the light of dawn. The black and white armor seemed to turn into a blur.

She was going all in, rushing at the enemy without leaving herself even the slightest chance to retreat.

'Wh...'

Things were happening too fast for Sunny to form a coherent thought. He could only watch, time slowing down to a crawl, a storm of emotions raging in his mind.

The demon reacted almost immediately, recognizing the threat. But "almost" didn't count on a battlefield. A moment of distraction was all it took to lose everything. That one mistake, no matter how small, had been enough to seal his fate.

...If Nephis was really capable of breaking through the creature's indestructible carapace, that is. Otherwise, it was all for nothing, and they would be the ones dying, instead.

The fearsome giant moved his scythe, trying to slice her apart. The pincer flashed from the other side, threatening to crush her body into pulp. But he was a fraction of a second too late.

Changing Star was just a tiny bit faster.

As she ran, something changed about the cadence of her steps. Sunny couldn't see her face behind the visor of her helmet, but if he could, he would see a grimace of agony contorting Neph's pale face.

In the next moment, a soft white radiance ignited beneath the skin of her hands. However, this time, it didn't stay there. Instead, the white flame flowed outward, into the hilt of the silver sword, and then into its blade.

The sword suddenly turned into a sharp radiant edge, burning with incandescent white light. It shined so brightly that Sunny felt the desire to close his eyes.

However, the radiance wasn't soft and warm anymore. Instead, it seemed to be capable of reducing anything it touched to ash and sharp enough to cut the fabric of the world itself.

Perhaps, it was even sharp enough to cut the strings of fate.

Sunny remembered how Nephis had described her Aspect Ability... "it can be used for healing". Back then, he had suspected that this phrase of hers implied that there was more to it. He even marveled at how precious and rare such an Ability would be.

It seemed as though he was right. Changing Star's miraculous flame was capable of both healing and destroying. It possessed an enhancing effect similar to his own Shadow Control, at least when applied to weapons. Who knew what else it could do?

An incredible Ability indeed.

Looking back, he understood that Nephis had not tortured herself in vain. All the times she pretended to meditate while enduring the excruciating

agony of her Flaw in secret were meant to make this moment possible. To give her enough fortitude to use this Ability in battle without passing out from the pain.

She succeeded. The question was... would that be enough?

Was her sword strong enough to break the mighty carapace of the Awakened demon? After all, no matter how incredible the Ability, it was still powered by a weak Dormant soul core of a lowly Sleeper.

...They were about to find out.

A few steps away from the Carapace Demon's towering torso, Nephis bent her legs and jumped, soaring high into the air. Her sword flashed forward in a vicious thrust, so fast that, for a moment, it looked like a beam of pure white sunlight.

Then, it collided with the strange alloy of the giant's lustrous armor... right at the spot where his heart was supposed to be.

'Of course!'

Back when they were hiding in the dead leviathan's empty spine, Cassie had told them about her vision. In that vision, she saw the Carapace Demon being attacked by a terrible creature of the deep dark sea. In the aftermath of the battle, the demon was severely wounded and on the verge of dying.

The most horrible wound was on his chest, where the armor was torn apart and shattered, revealing the monster's beating heart. With time, all his injuries had healed.

Except for this one.

While the carapace of the demon seemed to have recovered, in truth, it was never fully restored. In this one spot, the armor was secretly weakened. And it was exactly to that spot that Nephis had delivered her blow.

It didn't matter whether her radiant sword was really capable of breaking through the impregnable armor of the Awakened creature, because she

attacked the only weak spot on his body, the place where his armor had already been broken.

...With a flash of white light, the incandescent sword pierced through the metal of the demon's carapace and plunged into his body, unleashing a fury of fire inside the adamantine shell.

It seemed as though the giant was suddenly illuminated from within, with beams of light shining through the cracks in his armor. For a moment, the surreal sight was burned into Sunny's mind.

Then, Changing Star's sword had reached the Carapace Demon's heart and sliced it apart, incinerating everything around it and making the azure blood of the fearsome creature boil and evaporate.

Sunny's legs buckled, and he gracelessly fell on his ass.

'Wh—wha... We did it?'

The demon staggered. His arms slowly rose, as though trying to pull Nephis into a final embrace. But then, as his body twitched, they fell to the ground.

Neph landed in the sand and jumped back, ready to defend herself.

But there was no need.

The proud guardian of the Ashen Barrow was dying. The scarlet light in his one remaining eye was dimming, any semblance of intelligence quickly disappearing from his gaze.

The demon heavily slumped, all remnants of strength abandoning his mighty body. Turning his head with incredible effort, he cast one last look on the great tree. Then, his gaze stopped on Sunny.

There was no fury or madness in that gaze anymore. Only some strange, calm, inexplicable emotion. It almost felt like... relief.

Before Sunny could discern the meaning of that emotion, the last glimmer of light was gone from the eye of the Carapace Demon. His head rolled

back and fell.

They won.

In front of the giant body, Nephis had dismissed her helmet. Behind it, her face was pale and tired, her hair sticking to it in a sweaty mess. The afterglow of the white radiance was already extinguished, leaving her eyes grey once again.

Changing Star kneeled, then lay down on her back, too exhausted to move.

The whole fight lasted less than a minute, but it took everything out of both of them.

Sunny followed Neph's example and lay on the ground, trying to catch his breath.

They actually won. He couldn't quite believe it.

'I want to sleep for a week.'

Remembering that Cassie was still waiting in the branches of the great tree, not knowing who lived and who died, Sunny sighed. A few moments later, he deeply inhaled.

Then, straining his vocal cords, he screamed at the top of his lungs.

In the silence of the morning, in the center of the tall hill covered with ashen sand, under the branches of a beautiful, giant tree, a strange shout could be heard:

"One demon steak, coming right up!"

Chapter 73: The Circle Of Death

A few minutes later, Sunny heard a noise coming from somewhere above. Looking in that direction, he noticed that Cassie was standing at the edge of the wide branch, gripping the golden rope in her hands.

Before he could react, the blind girl was already climbing down. She was very cautious, but also quite nimble for someone without sight.

He blinked.

'Is she crazy? That's dangerous!'

But he was worried for nothing. Cassie quickly reached the ground and let go of the rope, safe and sound. She then summoned her staff and took a hesitant step, trying to remember where his shout had come from.

Sunny made his presence known and guided her by saying:

"I'm here!"

The blind girl turned her head in his direction and walked forward, carefully feeling the ground in front of her with the staff. Because of how uneven the surface of the island had become, it took her longer than usual to reach him.

Just as she was about to walk past, Sunny spoke again:

"Hey, Cas."

Cassie stopped and lowered her head with a surprised expression. Then, she asked:

"Why are you lying on the ground?"

He smiled weakly.

"Ah, it's very comfortable."

Suddenly, the blind girl frowned and asked in a worried tone:

"Are you hurt?"

Sunny shook his head with a sigh. His sense of humor was not always appreciated. In fact, it had often landed him in hot water in the past.

"Just bruised all over. Nothing serious. I'm just really tired... that one was really intense."

Since Cassie was still frowning, he thought for a moment and added:

"Neph is also fine. She's resting a bit further away."

Finally, the delicate girl relaxed. Her face cleared, and she offered him a hesitant smile.

"You really killed that demon?"

Sunny cast a gaze at the giant corpse and closed his eyes.

"Yeah. He's very dead."

Both of them were silent for some time. Sunny was on the verge of falling asleep when Cassie carefully asked:

"So... you're just going to continue lying here?"

He opened his eyes and blinked, trying to remember what was going on.

'Oh, right. It's morning. There are things we have to do...'

The last day was excruciatingly long and exhausting. They had to make preparations to execute the plan, race to the top of the hill, climb the great tree, hide themselves in its branches, risk their lives to set the demon on fire, not to mention the... all the stuff that happened after. All culminating in the short but terrifying battle against the creature itself.

And yet, it was not time to rest yet. They had to take basic precautions, at least.

Straining his exhausted body, Sunny stood up and offered Cassie his shoulder. After she placed her hand on it, he walked over to the Carapace Demon's corpse, stopping at the spot where Nephis was sprawled in the sand.

She greeted them with a tired glance.

"Good morning."

Out of habit, Changing Star tried to force a polite smile. However, today it did not look very convincing.

'Huh, I give it 3.6 out of ten. Not great, not terrible.'

Soon, the three of them were sitting in a circle, passing around the glass bottle full of cold, refreshing water. Sunny was in the middle of describing their fight with the Carapace Demon:

"... so he got distracted for a few moments. That's when Neph attacked. She used her Aspect Ability to ignite her sword and struck at the weakened patch of armor on the demon's chest, the one you told us about. It really was not as strong as the rest of his carapace, so the sword went through and pierced the bastard's heart."

Sunny noted that Cassie did not seem surprised at the mention of Changing Star's new trick. Either she knew all along because Nephis had told her, or she saw something in one of her visions. Regardless, he decided not to press the topic.

"The demon was already severely wounded from his fight with the... the thing from the sea, so it was enough to finish him off. A few seconds later, he was dead."

Cassie shook her head in astonishment.

"That is... incredible. Two Sleepers killing an awakened demon! I thought that stuff like that only happens in webtoons."

Nephis corrected her:

"Three Sleepers. Without your vision and advice, we wouldn't have been able to do anything."

The blind girl lowered her face, a little embarrassed.

"Still. Two or three, it doesn't really change a lot, does it?"

Sunny looked from one girl to another, then finally turned to Cassie.

"You're right, it's not something one would expect to happen. But, anyway... I promised to cook demon meat for you after this is over, didn't I? Are you ready to witness my incredible culinary talent?"

He smiled, already tasting the juicy, tender meat in his mouth. However, Cassie suddenly frowned, a hesitant expression appearing on her face.

"I... I don't know about that."

He raised his eyebrows.

"What? Why?"

She lingered before answering.

"Well, it just seems weird to eat the meat of an intelligent creature. Even if it was evil. I didn't think about it before, but now... uh. It just doesn't seem right, I guess."

Sunny blinked. Actually, he did not think about it either. In retrospect, the idea of making steaks out of a creature whose intelligence was comparable to theirs did seem a little wrong. Even if that creature was a bloodthirsty demon who would have swallowed them whole without a second thought.

It was just how things worked in the Dream Realm. Monsters devoured humans, and humans devoured monsters. It was the circle of life... death? The circle of death.

But the Carapace Demon was not only smart. He had his own thoughts and personality. Even though Nightmare Creatures were universally insane and obsessed with murder and destruction, just like he was, there were also other qualities to the ironclad giant.

He was proud and fearless, even valiant. When fighting against the terrifying monsters of the dark sea, he did not hesitate to stand his ground, refusing to surrender. Cooking the meat of someone like that could indeed be considered... strange.

'How come Teacher Julius did not educate me on the ethics of eating your enemies? What an oversight!'

Misunderstanding Sunny's silence, Cassie blushed and said:

"Sorry. I know it seems ridiculous, but that's just how I feel. You and Neph don't have to do the same."

Sunny shook his head.

"No, you might be right. I understand... sort of. It's just that we didn't bring any supplies with us, so we won't be able to eat anything unless we go hunting."

The blind girl sighed. Then, her face brightened and she said:

"What about the great tree's fruits? I bet they're delicious!"

Sunny looked at her in amazement.

"Are you serious?"

Cassie was visibly confused by his question.

"Uh... yes? Why?"

He blinked a couple of times before answering.

"That tree is magnificent and pretty, but it's also very strange and suspicious. Why is it able to grow here when nothing else can? I'm pretty sure that it's the reason why all the coral around the Ashen Barrow is dead. Have you seen anything else capable of damaging the labyrinth itself?"

Sunny looked at Cassie, then at Nephis, trying to show how serious he was about this.

"In any case, it's too creepy. I don't think that we should eat these fruits. Who knows what they'll do to us?"

The blind girl smiled.

"You're being a little paranoid, don't you think? A tree is a tree. Actually, I think it's a wonderful example of how life can prevail against all odds, even in this terrible place. I'm willing to bet that its fruits are perfectly fine."

He stared at her, not knowing what to say. How could Cassie be so dismissive of his completely valid concern? That wasn't like her at all. Unpleasantly surprised, Sunny turned to Neph, hoping that she would support him.

Changing Star thought things through before speaking. Then, she said in a measured voice:

"Sunny is right. There are too many strange things about that tree. Eating its fruits would be too risky."

'Finally, a voice of reason!'

He exhaled, relieved.

However, his heart was still inexplicably gripped with worry.

As Cassie sighed with disappointment, Changing Star turned to him and asked:

"The Echo was destroyed?"

Sunny's face darkened. He was still pained by the loss of his loyal scavenger.

"Yeah. The demon acted faster than I had expected. He killed it before I could do anything."

Nephis frowned.

"Too bad. Our speed will be severely reduced."

'Have you no heart, woman?! At least pretend to be sad! My poor Echo is gone!'

His shadow shook its head, amazed at the childishness of its master. Sunny was also surprised by his reaction, considering that his own first thought after the Echo had died was about how much money he wouldn't be able to make by selling it.

"Yeah. It's a... uh... pity."

Changing Star gave him a nod and then asked:

"You also lost your sword?"

Sunny sighed and gritted his teeth.

"Yes. It shattered when I blocked the demon's scythe."

Which hurt even more than the death of his scavenger. Azure Blade was his first sword. He fought and trained with it for a long time. It was already like a part of him.

And now it was gone.

Nephis raised a hand.

"Well, you're in luck. I received a Memory after killing the Carapace Demon. It's a weapon..."

Chapter 74: Midnight Shard | Shadow Slave

Sunny's heart skipped a bit.

Instantly, he forgot all about the Azure Blade. Yes, that sword held a certain sentimental value... but who the hell cares about sentimentality?! It came from a carapace scavenger, which wasn't bad at all for his current rank. Few Sleepers got to wield Awakened weapons.

But this new Memory came from an actual awakened demon! A demon!

That made it an Awakened Memory of the third tier, two whole tiers above the Azure Blade. There were seven tiers in total, corresponding to the seven classes of Nightmare Creatures, from beasts to titans. Strictly speaking, a higher tier did not always mean that a Memory will be more powerful, but generally, the more advanced a creature was, the more unique and formidable Memories it left behind.

That's why the Puppeteer's Shroud, which came from an awakened tyrant and was thus considered to be a Tier Five Awakened armor, was so precious.

'Please, be awesome!'

Sunny tried very hard to not let his excitement show on his face. Pretending to be nonchalant, he kept his voice even and said:

"Really? That's good."

Nephis took his hand, ruining all Sunny's attempts to appear calm, and closed her eyes. Hiding the startled expression on his face, Sunny felt a spark of energy travel from her body to his. It was just like that time he transferred the Starlight Legion Armor to her, only in reverse.

[You have received a Memory: Midnight Shard.]

'Huh. Cool name.'

He summoned the runes and impatiently searched for the description of his new weapon.

Memory: [Midnight Shard].

Memory Rank: Awakened.

Memory Type: Weapon.

Memory Description: [Forged from the shard of a fallen star, this stalwart blade is firm and unyielding. It favors those who are willing to fight to the last drop of blood and knows no surrender.]

'Interesting.'

Not wasting any time, Sunny summoned the Midnight Shard. Immediately, an elegant sword appeared in his hand.

The sword looked a bit like the Azure Blade, but only in the sense that it was single-edged and had a long hilt suitable for two hands. However, this was where the similarities ended. For starters, its blade was much longer, somewhere between seventy and eighty centimeters, and slightly curved. It was forged out of the same bright, lustrous metal as the Carapace Demon's armor.

It was incredibly sharp.

The hilt was made out of polished black wood, quite similar in appearance to the onyx branches of the great tree. The crossguard was round in shape and more pronounced than that of the Azure Blade, offering better support and protection to the wielder's hand.

The sword had no decorations, no ornaments, no embellishments. It was simple and austere, like a true weapon designed for battle and battle alone. It seemed to radiate a cold, fearsome aura.

As soon as his hand touched the Midnight Shard, Sunny felt that this sword possessed an unbreakable will. Its blade was strong enough to withstand

devastating blows without suffering any damage. With this sword in his hand, nothing would be able to leave Sunny unarmed again.

More than that, there was a strange new sensation somewhere deep in his heart. When Sunny held the Midnight Shard, he could feel a subtle presence, as though there was a deep well of power hiding inside of him, just beyond reach. He couldn't quite understand how to access that power yet, but it was certainly real.

'I guess I'll have to win its "favor" first. But how do I do it? Hmm. I'll have to experiment later.'

Admiring his new weapon, Sunny looked at Nephis and said:

"Even I know what type of sword this is. It's a... a katana, right?"

She studied the Midnight Shard and then answered:

"Technically, it's a tachi. It's longer than a traditional katana and has a slightly different blade shape. But they're quite similar."

A tachi... well, it sounded nice anyway. And most of the principles he had learned with the Azure Blade could be applied to a sword of this type as well, since they shared the same foundation.

The new acquisition wasn't quite enough to make Sunny forget about the loss of the Echo, but his mood did improve significantly. He liked the Midnight Shard... a lot. There was beauty in its simple, resolute design.

It was understated and deadly. Kind of like Sunny himself.

It was a significant upgrade.

Suddenly, a dark thought appeared in Sunny's mind. Glancing at Nephis, he cleared his throat and said after a bit of hesitation:

"Uh... it's a very nice weapon. Tier three, no less. Are you sure that you don't want to keep it for yourself?"

Changing Star was the one to deal the final blow to the Carapace Demon, after all. By right, the Memory belonged to her. But Sunny really, really hoped that she would refuse.

Nephis shook her head.

"I already have a sword. It suits me."

Inwardly, Sunny sighed with relief.

'Good,' he thought. 'Makes you wonder, though — if she's unwilling to exchange her longsword for a tier-three weapon... then what is the tier of that silver sword of hers?'

He didn't buy the idea that it simply suited Changing Star better even for a second. She had told him herself that the principle of using these types of swords was basically the same. Upgrading to the Midnight Shard and giving the old weapon to Sunny would not have caused her any problem. The only reason she would refuse it was that it would have been a downgrade, instead.

Once again, he became curious about the exact circumstances of how Neph had gotten her True Name. To receive his own, Sunny had to kill an awakened tyrant. Could it be possible that she had done the same? Or even... something more incredible?

But he was too tired to try and fish for information.

They all were.

Afraid that the strange winged creature they had seen devouring a dead centurion would appear again, this time to claim the remains of the Carapace Demon, the three Sleepers relocated to a far side of the island and hid behind the trunk of the great tree.

Only when they were sure that nothing would be able to notice them from above did they finally allow the exhaustion to prevail and went to sleep.

Sunny fell into dreamless darkness almost instantly, happy to finally be able to rest.

However, this time something strange happened.

He actually saw a dream.

'Strange,' Sunny thought. 'This isn't supposed to happen in the Dream Realm... right?'

Then, there was no more time to think...

Chapter 75: Broken Dreams | Shadow Slave

Sunny woke up from the insistent sense of alarm coming from his shadow. Groggy and disoriented, he opened his eyes and sat up.

'Wh—what's wrong?'

He looked down at the shadow and saw it repeatedly pointing up with a tense expression on its... well, it didn't have a face. He could just tell that it was nervous.

'Trouble?'

Sunny looked up and saw nothing but the scarlet leaves of the great tree. The sky was hidden, but he could easily tell that the sun was still up. It seemed that he was asleep for just a few hours.

There was no threat anywhere in sight. He frowned.

'What got you so spooked?'

The shadow just pointed up again, seemingly irritated by his stupidity. Sunny blinked a couple of times and addressed it again:

'High in the tree? Higher? In the sky?'

Finally satisfied, the shadow crossed its arms.

'Something dangerous is above the island... that creepy raven thing again?'

He had to check... but why did he feel as though he was forgetting something?

Sunny scowled, trying to understand where this feeling of missing something important had come from. What was there to miss? He was asleep, then woke up and conversed with the shadow.

Asleep...

Suddenly, he remembered bits and pieces of a strange dream. At least it seemed like a dream... was it? People weren't supposed to dream in the Dream Realm. It was just how things worked... from what he knew, only Cassie seemed to be an exception from this rule.

He didn't remember much about this supposed dream of his, with even the remaining fragments already fading from his memory. There was a... a woman grabbing him by the shoulders, an expression of horror and panic on her face. She was saying something, but he couldn't hear what.

No, not a woman. It was... Cassie? Yes, it was her. And the thing she was saying...

Sunny strained his memory, trying to catch the pieces of the dream before they completely disappeared.

'Yeah, I think she was saying... uh...'

Suddenly, he could clearly hear Cassie's frightened, tense voice as she was hurriedly telling him to remember something, repeating the same sentence over and over again in a begging tone:

"...you have to remember, Sunny! Five! It's five! Remember! You have to remember! It's five!"

'What a strange dream.'

Sunny cast a glance at Cassie, who was sleeping peacefully near Nepth, and shook his head in bewilderment. He wasn't sure if this memory of his was really a dream or some strange scene he had imagined right before falling asleep. With how the Dream Realm worked, he was leaning toward the latter possibility.

'Still. I better tell the girls when...'

He was distracted from this thought by the shadow, which waved its hands impatiently.

'Oh, right. There's a threat in the sky...'

Instantly, Sunny had forgotten all about his intention to share the contents of this strange memory of his with Nephis and Cassie. In fact, he had forgotten that it was strange and possibly important altogether.

This lapse in his judgment was sudden and unnatural, but since Sunny couldn't remember things that he had forgotten, he didn't notice anything amiss and went about his business as if nothing had happened.

...If he did, he could have realized that this might not have been the first time he had forgotten something important since they arrived at the Ashen Barrow.

Standing up, Sunny summoned the Midnight Shard and glanced darkly at the blood-red leaves of the great tree. Feeling the coolness of the black polished hilt in his hand, he felt a little calmer.

Woken up by his quiet movements, Nephis opened her eyes and looked at him, her body tensing up. There was a silent question in her eyes.

Sunny shook his head.

"I don't know yet. Stay with Cassie while I check things out."

Leaving the girls behind, Sunny walked forward. He was planning to reach the edge of the island, where the branches of the colossal tree were not as thick and the sky could be seen through the openings in its crown.

Technically, he could have sent his shadow to do this instead of going himself. But in situations like this, where the danger was unknown, Sunny usually preferred to keep the shadow close by in case he needed to use it.

Reaching the eastern slope of the Ashen Barrow, he carefully looked up, still hidden in the shadow of the great tree.

Up above in the vast grey sky, a small black dot was circling around the island.

Sunny's chest became heavy with wariness. Back when the terrible winged beast had first appeared, it looked exactly like this from the distance.

Leaving the shadow behind to keep watch on the black dot, he returned and briefly told Nephis and Cassie about his discovery.

"Right now, it's just flying above the island. I don't know if it's the same creature or not, and when it is going to land."

Changing Star frowned.

"Last time, it wasn't very interested in searching for live prey. Perhaps it's mostly a carrion eater, and thus is only interested in the Carapace Demon's carcass."

Cassie offered her own opinion:

"Maybe we're too weak and little to satiate it? After all, it never came for the corpses of the scavengers we had slain. As if eating mere beasts is beneath it."

Sunny shook his head.

"Back then, it did come for the carapace centurion's meat. But it took a few scavengers with it as well before leaving. So it'll be too optimistic to think that this abomination will not try to devour us too if given a chance."

Nephis thought for a while, then gave him a nod.

"You're right. The best course of action would be to stay away from the Carapace Demon for now and hide when it decides to land."

Then, looking up, she added:

"But first, we must observe it to make sure that it's the same creature and confirm its intentions."

Not having an argument against this logic, Sunny led the girls to the spot where he had left his shadow. There, they sat on the ground and watched

the black dot as it circled around the Ashen Barrow.

Observing the flying creature left them disturbed and unsure of what to do.

The black dot drew closer a few times, allowing them to discern that it was indeed the same terrible monstrosity that they had encountered a few weeks before, or at least a creature of the same type. However, it never got too close to the crown of the great tree, as though hesitating to land in its shadow.

What's worse, as hours passed by, it was joined by two other abominations of the same breed, each as horrifying and repulsive as the first one was. Now, three black dots were circling in the skies above their heads, filling Sunny's heart with dread.

One of those creatures, with its corpselike white body and raven-black feathers, with an unnatural mess of powerful limbs protruding from its wide chest, each ending with a set of terrifying talons, was enough to wipe out their entire group.

The memory of how easily the creature had broken through the adamantine shell of the carapace centurion with its massive beak was still fresh in his mind. He suspected that these abominations were at least as powerful as the Carapace Demon was, or perhaps even more so.

And now there were three of them.

'We'd better hide well.' he thought, cold sweat running down his back.

However, the flying monsters seemed to be reluctant to approach the Ashen Barrow for some reason. They just circled around it, sometimes hesitantly approaching, but then gaining height again. Their behavior was strange and disturbing.

After some time, Cassie quietly said:

"Maybe they're not hungry?"

Sunny blinked, trying to imagine a world where a Nightmare Creature might not be hungry. Was it even possible?

He, on the other hand...

"I don't know about these albino chickens, but I'm hungry as hell."

This was true. The three of them had not eaten anything since yesterday. Sunny was afraid that if the abominations did decide to land on the island, the loud growls of his stomach would give away his position.

Nephis glanced at him and asked:

"Want to eat some grilled chicken?"

Sunny opened his eyes wide and hissed:

"Don't even think about it!"

She stared at him, then turned away with a smile.

'That was... a joke? She knows how to joke?'

Well... at least someone's sense of humor was worse than his.

...In the end, their worst fears did not come true. After the sun began to roll toward the horizon, the three flying abominations finally made a decision and left the skies above the Ashen Barrow, flying west in a loose wedge formation. They never descended low enough to notice the three Sleepers, let alone landing on the surface of the large island.

Sunny was left drenched in sweat and tired from anticipating a disaster, almost disappointed at the fact that all this worrying had turned out to be for nothing. Looking at Cassie, who couldn't see that the danger had passed, he said:

"They're gone."

The blind girl exhaled with relief and relaxed, the frown disappearing from her face.

"Thank Heavens. Sitting here and waiting was five times worse than hiding from one of them at those cliffs."

For some reason, Sunny flinched a little.

"What... what did you say?"

"I said that waiting for them to land was very tiresome."

He blinked, not understanding why he had reacted so strangely to this innocuous sentence. Did he see a dream having to do with Cassie and number five? Right, he did. Not that it was anything to think twice about.

"Oh, yeah. You're right."

Then he turned to Nephis and asked:

"What do you want to do now?"

Changing Star looked west, where the black dots had disappeared from sight, and said after a short pause:

"Let's check the western edge of the island and decide on the next high point to reach."

Sunny shrugged, not having any objections.

Cassie smiled:

"Good idea! Who knows, maybe we'll finally see the walls of the castle!"

Soon, they had crossed the island and approached its western slope. Here, the ground was raised just before plunging down, forming a natural rampart that hid the landscape from their eyes.

Nephis was the first to climb up and reach the top.

Sunny was just behind her when he felt that something was wrong. Changing Star's posture was somehow strange, stiff and rigid, as though she had suddenly turned to stone.

Stepping on the ashen surface of the natural rampart, he worriedly looked at Nephis and noticed a grim, resentful expression on her face. He had never seen her in such a state before.

Turning his head, Sunny looked west and then narrowed his eyes. His face instantly darkened.

Feeling the desire to curse, Sunny gritted his teeth and clenched his fists. Inside his head, only one word was repeating over and over again.

'Damn! Damn! Damn!'

Chapter 76: The Abyss | Shadow Slave

Beyond the western edge of the Ashen Barrow, the landscape of the Forgotten Shore was not at all like what Sunny had expected — and hoped — to see.

On this side of the island, the slope was much steeper. At the spot where it was supposed to end, the familiar sight of the flat wasteland was nowhere to be seen. Instead, the ground continued to slope downward at a less drastic, but still considerably sharp angle.

It continued far into the distance. In fact, the whole island appeared to be standing on the edge of a colossal depression in the earth, one that stretched as far as the eye could see. With its edges slightly curved, it resembled a giant crater left behind by an unimaginable impact.

From what Sunny was able to observe, the crater's diameter could only be calculated in hundreds of kilometers. The roots of the giant tree, which could be seen protruding from the soil far below, seemed like tiny blades of grass in comparison to the sheer size of the abyssal chasm's wall.

It was like the whole world was tilted on its side, making Sunny's head spin.

In short, there were no more high natural features to the west of them. The only way forward was to go down, with no hope of finding shelter from the crushing torrents of the dark sea.

Which meant that there was no way forward at all. Their journey to the west had come to an end.

And with it, all hope of finding a gateway to the real world was lost.

Sunny stared at the desolate landscape, feeling rage and disbelief clawing at his heart. He just couldn't believe that all their struggles were for nothing. But the proof was right in front of him, real and undeniable.

'Damn it! Damn it all!'

He tried to think of some cunning way to solve the situation, but there was nothing his imagination could come up with. The dark sea with all its horrors drowned the world every night, and the only way to escape it was to climb high enough before the sunset. With no heights anywhere in sight, what could he do?

Sunny glanced at Nephis, who seemed to be even more crestfallen than him. Her face had turned into an icy mask, a dark look full of bitterness and resentment in her eyes. He opened his mouth, trying to come up with something to say, but no words came to his mind.

In the end, they both remained silent until the distant rumble announced the return of the dark sea.

Deep in the colossal crater, dark torrents appeared from beyond the horizon, rushing to fill it to the brim. A little bit stunned, Sunny watched as the water level rapidly rose, finally turning the endless chasm into a vast sea of black. Then, it began to overflow, sending an unstoppable flood of water into the wasteland. Flowing past the Ashen Barrow, it rushed inland, crushing against the coral of the crimson labyrinth.

Soon, the whole world was covered in seething black water.

Sunny licked his dry lips and turned to Nephis. After a short pause, he said in a raspy voice:

"I think we found the source of the dark sea."

She lingered, watching the last rays of sunshine slowly disappear from the sky, then turned to him with a grim expression on her face.

"...Let's head back."

All three of them felt lost and heartbroken because of the terrible discovery. Cassie in particular seemed to be utterly shocked.

"It doesn't make sense, it just doesn't," she mumbled on their way to camp.
"How could it be?"

Gripping Sunny's shoulder, she quickened her step and asked:

"Are you sure that there's nothing higher than the sea level out there? Are you absolutely sure?"

He sighed, feeling his mood turning even darker than before.

"Yes. We looked quite thoroughly. The whole land just goes down, down, and down. It stretches to the horizon, as far as we could see, in all directions except for the east. The Ashen Barrow is right on the edge."

The blind girl shook her head:

"But how could it be? I've seen that we had reached the castle! There must be a way!"

Sunny remained silent, not knowing how to answer. If there really was a way, he had no idea about it.

After a few seconds, Nephis answered instead of him:

"We will try to come up with something tomorrow. Worst... worst-case scenario, we'll have to go around the whole thing."

Sunny trembled at the thought. A journey like that would take months. To circle around the colossal crater, they would have to cover many times more distance than they had in the prior weeks, each day bringing the risk of stumbling onto something beyond their ability to resist.

And each night bringing the risk of something stumbling onto them...

The chances of surviving several months in this hellish place were nothing if not abyssal.

'Ha, ha. Abyssal...'

With a grimace, he tried to not think of the worst-case scenario. The darkness of the falling night was not the best environment for scary thoughts.

'Tomorrow. We'll rest, recharge, and think of something tomorrow. It is just like Cassie said... since she saw us entering the castle, there must be a way.'

They reached their temporary camp just before the sun had completely disappeared. Lying on the makeshift bed of fallen leaves, Sunny tiredly closed his eyes and thought:

'I hope I won't see any dreams today.'

Then, he slightly frowned.

'Dreams? Since when am I capable of dreaming in this place? Oh, right... there was that one dream... or was it a memory? What was it about again... huh, I can't seem to remember...'

With that thought disappearing from his mind, he fell asleep.

In the morning, the mood between the three of them was pretty somber. No one seemed to want to talk or do anything, aimlessly staring at the ground or the rustling leaves of the great tree.

In addition to the blow of yesterday's revelation, they were also hungry. The corpse of the Carapace Demon was starting to look more and more appealing, at least to Sunny. However, he was still not at the point of breaking his promise to Cassie.

Finally, Nephis broke the silence. Standing up, she looked up with grim resolution and said:

"I'm going to climb to the top of the tree and take a look around. Maybe I'll notice something that we missed from up high."

Sunny stared at the giant tree, suddenly feeling incredibly small. It was truly enormous. The Ashen Barrow itself was already much taller than the giant knight's statue and every other shelter they had seen, and the tree almost dwarfed it in size. Climbing all the way up would take a lot of time and effort.

But maybe she would really be able to notice something from that incredible height.

He scratched the back of his head and said:

"Alright. But be careful. Keep an eye on the sky. If you notice those winged abominations again, come back down."

Changing Star gave him a nod and headed for the tree. Without turning her head, she calmly said as a farewell:

"Take care of Cassie while I'm gone. It shouldn't be more than a few hours."

Sunny waved a hand and watch her walk away. Then, he tried to think of something to do.

On a usual day, he would have already started his morning training. But today, he was too hungry.

'Come on. Hunger is not an excuse. Do you think you'll always have a full stomach before a battle? No! So get up and train. Don't you want to try how the Midnight Shard feels in your hand?'

With a sigh, Sunny got up.

He trained for an hour, enjoying the swift and reliable feeling of his new sword. The long tachi was truly incredible. It was light, maneuverable, and unrelenting. Its edge sang as it cut the air. Sunny already felt as though it was a part of him.

His movements were fluid and measured, almost elegant.

After the training session was over, he decided to do something useful.

Walking over to the Carapace Demon's corpse, Sunny spent some time prying the soul shard out of it. In the end, he gathered all three of the crystals with some effort and stashed them into the seaweed rucksack.

What to do now?

After a bit of pondering, he suddenly got an idea and tried to find the place from his memory — the one where the Carapace Demon had dropped the transcendent soul shard into the sand. That shard had been brought to the Ashen Barrow by the subservient centurion and would be a real treat for Neph or Cassie.

He quickly found the right spot. However, no matter how hard Sunny looked, he couldn't find the alluring crystal. In the process, a couple more hours had passed by.

'Stange. It was quite large. Where could it be?'

He was determined to continue the search. But, at that moment, the shadow that he had left with Cassie noticed movement in the branches of the great tree.

Nephis was back.

Sunny walked back to the camp, thinking about what she had found. Was there hope for them after all? Or was there only more bad news?

By the time he returned, Neph and Cassie were sitting on the ground with relaxed expressions on their faces.

'She saw something?' Sunny thought, suddenly excited.

But in the next second, his eyes widened.

The two girls were holding something in their hands, their lips painted red. They were... eating.

They were eating the fruits of the great tree.

Chapter 77: Enthralled | Shadow Slave

Sunny stumbled and looked at his companions in utter shock.

Nephis and Cassie were each holding a large, round, glistening fruit. The skin of these fruits was smooth and black as onyx, while the succulent insides were red as ruby. Their hands, chins and lips were smeared with red juice, making it look as though they were feasting on blood.

The air was filled with an alluring, sweet aroma.

Sunny recoiled...

But his stomach involuntarily growled, reminding him how hungry he was.

Nephis looked at Sunny and offered him a relaxed smile.

"Hey."

He stared at her, lost for words. Finally, after a few seconds had passed, Sunny collected himself and screamed:

"What do you mean 'hey'?! What the hell are you doing?!"

His voice was loud, full of disbelief and anger.

Both Neph and Cassie turned to face him. They were visibly confused.

"Why are you shouting?"

Sunny gaped at them, feeling like he had lost his mind. Why were they so nonchalant about this? What was going on here?!

Trying to find some sense in the situation, he took a cautious step forward and looked at Nephis. Did she... wait... what was he thinking about?

He was so hungry. It was hard to concentrate on anything except for food...

Shaking off the unexpected memory lapse, Sunny remembered what he was about to say and pressed:

"Why did you change your mind?"

Changing Star frowned.

"Changed my mind? About what?"

He clenched his teeth, thinking that she was trying to fool him.

"About the fruits! I thought we had agreed to avoid eating them!"

Nephis blinked, a confused expression appearing on her face.

"Did we?...Why?"

Sunny opened his mouth to answer, but then froze.

Actually, why did they make that agreement?

'Uh... I can't quite remember.'

He was sure that there was a reason, but his memory was completely blank. There definitely was an agreement... wasn't there?

He was pretty sure that there was, at least up until a few moments ago. Now, however... huh... did he imagine the whole thing? There really was no reason not to eat the alluring fruits. Especially when the three of them were so hungry...

'No, wait... that's not right!'

"Are you alright, Sunny?"

He flinched and glanced at Nephis, who was looking at him with concern. Suddenly, Sunny felt lost and confused. What were they talking about? Something... something about some sort of agreement?

What agreement?

Not knowing how to answer, he just stood there with a frown on his face and pouted.

'Ugh, this is embarrassing. Did I completely space out while she was talking to me?'

Fortunately, Cassie quickly came to his rescue. She always knew how to make the situation less awkward.

"Are you angry because we started eating without you?"

He looked at her and noticed the big, delicious fruit in her hands. His stomach growled.

'So hungry...'

"Uh... I guess?"

Cassie smiled and pointed to the ground, where another fruit was placed on the pile of fallen leaves. Her teeth were smeared with red juice.

"Don't worry! Neph brought three of them, one for each."

'How nice of her...'

Sunny picked up the fruit, looked at it, and took a bite without thinking.

Instantly, his mouth was filled with delightful, cool sweetness. The succulent, juicy fruit was probably the most delicious thing he had ever tasted. It was both nourishing and refreshing, with rich texture and soft, lingering aftertaste. The ruby flesh practically melted on his tongue, making his whole body tingle. It was pure joy in the form of a fruit.

'Wow!'

Despite his delight, Sunny felt disturbed for some reason. Something was very wrong about the whole situation... but what?

Taking another bite, he frowned and tried to understand the source of this anxious feeling. It was hard to think about anything except for how heavenly the fruit of the Soul Tree tasted, but he forced himself to concentrate.

'Huh... Soul Tree? Since when... wait, don't get distracted...'

Sunny was finally able to pinpoint the source of the strangeness. It was his shadow. When he reached out to pick up the fruit, the shadow did not copy his movements, as though reluctant to touch it.

Even now it was motionless, refusing to mimic him eating the fruit.

'Weird. What is it with this guy?'

Sunny took one more bite and looked at the shadow, lost in thought.

The shadow had an eccentric temper, but it rarely did something without a reason. If it didn't like the fruit, there had to be something wrong with... the... fruit...

Sunny frowned, suddenly feeling a sense of dread grip his heart.

There was something... something wrong with the...

'Damn, why is it so hard to think about this stuff?!'

There was something wrong with the fruit? Why would there...

'Wait, is this why I screamed at Nephis? She broke an agreement... what was the agreement?'

Sunny was at the precipice of remembering something very important. He felt as though he just needed to pull on the thread, and the whole truth would reveal itself...

Something terrible was going to happen if he failed...

But then, Sunny got distracted.

Something unexpected happened, something that required his full attention.

Instantly, he somehow forgot all about the problem with the Soul Tree's fruits.

Because at that moment, the Spell was talking into his ear:

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

'Wh—what?'

He blinked, then looked at the delicious fruit in his hands. The Spell announced the increase in his power right after Sunny swallowed his third bite.

Stunned, he raised his head and looked at Nephis.

Changing Star, too, was staring at her fruit with a strange expression on her face. Feeling his gaze, she looked up.

Sunny licked his lips.

"Did you..."

At the same time, Nephis said:

"I just absorbed a point of soul essence."

Without saying anything, they both turned to Cassie.

The blind girl was enthusiastically devouring the fruit. Red juice was flowing down her chin and dripping to the ground.

Stopping for a moment, she smiled.

"Actually, I received mine a few bites ago."

Sunny's eyes widened. Excitedly, he summoned the runes and found the right cluster:

Shadow Fragments: [97/1000].

He really received a fragment!

He received a shadow fragment without risking his life in a battle against deadly monsters!

Finally, Sunny was able to realize why the Carapace Demon had been so fixated on the Soul Tree and its fruits.

These fruits were pure magic!

Forgetting all about the uneasy feeling, he raised his hand and greedily bit into the succulent, delicious, nourishing flesh...

Late in the evening, when the sun was already hidden behind the horizon and the dark sea had once again turned the Ashen Barrow into a lonely island, the three of them were preparing for the night.

They had moved their camp to rest between the roots of the great tree. With newfound energy received from consuming miraculous fruits, all their worries seemed to fade.

With no way to move further west, Nephis, Sunny and Cassie had decided to rest for a few days before making any decisions.

They deserved a short vacation.

The Ashen Barrows was a perfect place to recuperate. There were no monsters in the surrounding wasteland, it was large enough to protect them from the horrors of the sea, and they had plenty of food thanks to the Soul Tree.

What's more, that food could even provide them with power...

Where else would they be able to grow stronger without risking their lives?

As far as hell goes, this place was almost a paradise.

Sunny lay on the makeshift mattress of fallen leaves, feeling relaxed and optimistic for the first time in many, many days.

Things seemed to be getting better.

Before falling asleep, he glanced at the mighty branches of the great tree and thought with a bit of regret:

'With the Carapace Demon gone, there's no one to protect this magnificent tree anymore. When we continue our journey, it will be completely defenseless. What a shame...'

His consciousness was already half-asleep. However, one last thought entered Sunny's mind right before he completely slipped into the embrace of darkness:

"What a shame that no one will be here to serve it.... and feed it... and help it spread its seeds..."

Chapter 78: Bliss | Shadow Slave

In the morning, Sunny was woken up by the gentle rustling of leaves. Opening his eyes, he saw rays of sunshine falling through the scarlet crown of the Soul Tree, painting the world in soft shades of pink. The sight was beautiful and tranquil. It felt as though none of the dangers and terrors of the Dream Realm could reach him here.

A soft breeze touched his skin, bringing with it coolness and the smell of fallen leaves.

For the first time in a long while, Sunny felt at peace.

'Is this what a vacation feels like?'

If so, their decision to have one was the best decision ever.

He sat up with a yawn and lazily looked around. Cassie and Nephis were already awake. Seeing them put a smile on Sunny's face.

'Why the hell am I grinning?'

Shaking his head, Sunny put on a serious expression and said:

"Good morning."

The girls greeted him. Then, Nephis slightly tilted her head and asked:

"Hey. Do you remember why we didn't leave anyone to keep watch last night?"

Sunny blinked. Indeed, why hadn't anyone guarded the camp?

"Uh. No. I guess we were too tired? Plus, it's so safe here. Why deprive ourselves of sleep?"

She frowned. Sunny expected Changing Star to berate them, but, unexpectedly, she just shrugged.

"...I guess."

'Huh. That's not like her. Am I not the only one in a great mood?'

To make Neph feel better, he pointed down and said:

"Don't worry. My shadow would have warned us if anything had happened."

She seemed to have forgotten about her question already, returning to whatever she had been doing before. All three of them were easily distracted these days. Sunny sighed.

"So... what are you guys going to do today?"

Cassie turned to him with a smile and answered in a teasing tone:

"Nothing! We're on vacation, remember? So we're just going to rest and relax."

'Sounds like a plan. Speaking about plans...'

At that moment, Cassie scowled and said with a comically strict expression:

"You too, Sunny! You are not allowed to plan, plot and scheme. Just sit back and enjoy the day. Alright?"

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"Alright."

He felt as though he was forgetting something.

But what?

Looking at Nephis, Sunny hesitated and asked:

"Remind me, why did you climb the Soul Tree yesterday?"

She glanced at him in confusion.

"Uh... I don't really remember. To get the fruits?"

Sunny smiled at the mention of the miraculous fruits and nodded.

'Yeah. That makes sense...'

A few days passed by. Sunny, Nephis and Cassie spent them idling away, not concerned with anything in the world.

Their tired bodies and minds needed time to rest.

They slept until noon, ate the delightful fruits and sat around the fire, talking or simply soaking in the warmth. Sometimes, they would play games or engage in other forms of entertainment.

Other times, they would keep to themselves, enjoying the almost forgotten feeling of privacy. Sunny had been a loner for most of his life, so these past few weeks that he had spent side by side with other people, without even a minute to himself, were a taxing experience. He relished the opportunity to be alone with his thoughts once again.

Luckily, the island was large enough for the three of them to stay apart if they didn't wish to be disturbed.

Not that it happened often.

At first, he had expected that lazing around doing nothing would very quickly grow boring, but surprisingly, it did not. He felt perfectly fine simply laying on the ground and staring at the gently swaying branches of the Soul Tree, caught in a blissful reverie. In moments like these, he would lose track of time, often realizing that entire hours had passed only when the sun was about to set.

The concept of time, in general, had become strangely hard to grasp. Sunny wasn't entirely sure how many days they had spent on the peaceful island. He was pretty sure that it was less than a week, but couldn't remember the exact amount.

Not being able to remember something had become a common occurrence. All three of them were turning increasingly absentminded and forgetful. Sometimes, Sunny would catch himself straining to remember details of his previous life or notice the strangeness of their behavior. But a minute later, he would forget about these concerns, distracted by some innocuous thought or occurrence.

His memory was becoming hazier and hazier. The only clear things in it were how delicious and refreshing the magical fruits were, how pleasant it was to live under the shade of the Soul Tree, and how magnificent it was.

The Tree was beautiful, benevolent and generous. It protected them from the cursed blight of the crimson labyrinth, kept the monsters away and provided nourishment both for their bodies and for their soul cores. Sunny was becoming increasingly convinced that finding the majestic Soul Tree was a true blessing.

The thought of leaving its gifts behind and returning to the horror of the outside world seemed less and less attractive.

Why leave when they were perfectly happy here?

Well... at least two of them were.

While Nephis was as carefree and tranquil as Sunny and Cassie in the beginning, as time went by, she grew strangely despondent and gloomy. It seemed as though she had reverted back to her old, distant and unsociable self.

Instead of chatting or relaxing with them, Changing Star ended up spending most of her time sitting on the western edge of the island alone, staring into the distance with bleak eyes. Sunny had no idea what was wrong.

He was worried about her. Not even the frequent, insistent lapses of memory managed to overcome his concern about Neph.

On one of the evenings, Sunny approached the western slope of the island, feeling as though his head was about to split from pain. For some reason, he kept forgetting the reason for this visit on the way here. It took all of his willpower to hold on to his intentions.

He wanted to check on Nephis.

Just like always, she was sitting at the ridge of the western edge, gazing into the distance. Sunny climbed onto the ridge and sat down, looking at her with hesitation.

"Hey, Neph."

Changing Star glanced at him. Her indifferent expression was back, making any attempt to understand her true emotions futile.

However, it was clear that she was not alright.

"Hey."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

Was he seeing things, or was her hair a bit longer than before?

"Why aren't you enjoying the vacation?"

Changing Star frowned. After a while, she said:

"Don't we... need to keep moving west?"

He raised his eyebrows, surprised.

"West? What is in the west?"

Neph's frown deepened, turning into a scowl.

"I... I don't remember. But I feel... I feel..."

She grew silent, then said quietly:

"I feel like I have to do something very important."

'Abandon the Soul Tree... what a strange idea.'

Sunny pondered for some time, trying to understand where she got the idea that they had to move somewhere. Finally, he asked:

"Why west, of all directions?"

Nephis turned to him. There was a strange, pained expression on her face. Gritting her teeth, she whispered:

"I don't know."

Sunny sighed.

If she didn't know, then he, of course, had no idea either. All he knew was that he wanted to make her feel better.

But how?

Sunny frowned, trying to think of a way. He felt that there was something very obvious that he was forgetting. Something that would instantly erase Neph's suffering...

When the realization hit him, he froze.

'Of course! How could I forget...'

The answer was so clear. He just had to climb the Soul Tree and find an especially juicy fruit for her to eat...

Chapter 79: Twist Of Fate

It was already dark when Sunny returned to the great tree. Cassie was asleep, snuggled comfortably under her cloak. There was a peaceful smile on her face.

'Sweet dreams.'

She wasn't bothered by her terrible visions in a long time. Everything became better since they decided to stay on the tranquil island.

...Everything except for Neph's mood. She didn't even bother to return to camp today, staying at the western edge of the barrow. Sunny didn't like that she was so close to the black water.

He sighed.

'I need to get some tasty fruits for her as soon as possible.'

She definitely would not be able to stay sad after eating the magical fruits. They were so sweet and delicious! Sunny began salivating just from thinking about them.

'...Maybe I'll find one for myself, too.'

In the beginning, they took turns climbing to the lower branches of the Soul Tree to gather fruits. Lately, though, Nephis seemed to be distracted by her strange melancholy. As the result, the group relied on him to bring down fruits for everyone.

He had already picked the lowest branches clean, choosing the ripest fruits first. Later ones were smaller and not as heavenly, although they still tasted amazing. Since each fruit was big enough to satiate a person for a long time, they rarely ate more than one in a day. The ripest fruits provided Sunny with one or two shadow fragments, while the smaller ones gave one or even none at all.

'I wonder how many shadow fragments I accumulated. Should be more than a hundred, right? Maybe even one hundred and ten... no, no way. We've been here just for a few days, a week at most.'

He could just summon the runes and check, but somehow that thought didn't even occur to him.

...If it did, he would have been horrified.

Forgetting all about the shadow fragments, Sunny looked up and scratched the back of his head. Initially, he was planning to climb the tree in the morning and explore higher than he had previously gone, looking for the best, most delicious fruit possible to give to Neph. But after thinking about it, he decided to not wait until the night was over.

He could see perfectly in the dark, after all. And this way, he would be able to give Changing Star a delightful present much sooner.

Stepping close to the trunk of the miraculous tree, Sunny began climbing. The first stretch was the most difficult since he had nothing to grab except for small cracks and bumps on the smooth, obsidian bark. Reaching the branches required a lot of effort.

However, he was already accustomed to it. Moving his hands and feet almost on instinct, Sunny got higher and higher. Soon, he was already pulling himself on top of an enormous, wide branch.

These first branches were as wide as roads. He sat down and rested for some time, enjoying the coolness of the night air.

Sunny had never climbed the Soul Tree in the dark before. Without the bright sunbeams falling through the leaves, it looked strangely different. The vibrant magnificence was gone, replaced with eerie stillness.

The rustling of scarlet leaves did not seem calming and tranquil anymore. In fact, it made Sunny shudder. It sounded like... thousands and thousands of trapped souls, all screaming in agony.

'What's up with me today? How can I even think of such things? What a fool! Good thing that the great tree can't hear me — otherwise, I'd be so ashamed. Please forgive me, Soul Tree...'

Shaking his head, Sunny stood up and continued climbing. He was very disappointed in himself. After all the good things that the tree had given them, he had stupidly doubted its benevolence... its greatness... its desire to devour... always ravenous, always growing... starving, hungry... forever...

How ungrateful.

Why did he even begin to think about... huh... what exactly was he thinking about?

Sunny frowned, failing to recall his train of thought.

'Ugh, whatever. I'm here to find a tasty fruit for Neph, not practice my reasoning.'

Climbing higher and higher, he soon abandoned the area that they had explored before. The crown of the great tree was vast enough to form a maze of its own. The large branches grew chaotically in all directions, twisting and crossing each other, with thick foliage blocking lines of sight and making any attempt of looking for the fruits difficult and time-consuming.

Still, Sunny was determined to continue. He figured that if he went really high, where sunlight was denser, the fruits would be much riper.

They had never tried a fruit from the higher branches. If he could find a really amazing one, Nephis would have to change her mind and abandon her strange thoughts of leaving the island. After all, these fruits were magical. Maybe she'll even smile!

Encouraged, Sunny continued climbing.

Time slowly passed. After a long while, Sunny finally decided that he had climbed high enough. He wasn't sure how many hours ago he had started the ascent, but judging by the soreness of his muscles and the visibly diminished width of the branches, he was somewhere in the upper part of the tree.

Stepping on one of the branches, he slowly walked forward and looked from side to side. Searching for the fruits was not easy. It required good perception and patience.

...And a great sense of equilibrium, of course! Falling from this height would not be a great experience. In fact, it would be his last.

Carefully observing the surroundings, Sunny moved further and further away from the trunk of the great tree. The branches were softly swaying under his feet. A few times, he jumped from one to another, causing a change in the melody of rustling leaves.

On the way, he noticed several hanging fruits. They looked ripe and delicious, but none of them was really special. And he wanted to find the most wonderful fruit possible.

Finally, Sunny got so far that the branches grew really narrow and thin. Now, they were almost the same size as those of a normal tree, barely able to support his weight.

But he still did not find a suitable gift for Nephis.

Sunny helplessly looked around, crestfallen. He really thought that he would be able to.

Then, he noticed something strange.

Some distance away from him, the branches just above the one he was standing on were twisted downward, as though weighed down by something. However, he couldn't quite see what it was behind the almost impenetrable wall of leaves.

In fact, he only noticed the anomaly because it was dark. In the light of day, the bright color of the Soul Tree's foliage would make the shape of the branches indiscernible. But in Sunny's night vision, all colors were muted, almost turning into various shades of grey.

'Interesting.'

Jumping, he grabbed onto a higher branch and pulled himself up. Then, careful not to fall, Sunny approached the leaf barrier and forced his way through. In the process, he had to enhance his strength and agility with the help of the shadow — otherwise, he would either have had to turn back or tumbled down to his death.

Finally, he freed himself from the last layer of leaves and took a step forward.

Then, Sunny froze, his eyes opening wide with wonder.

Right in front of him, hidden from the world in the secretive pocket of twisted branches, a giant, elaborate bird nest rested between the scarlet leaves.

Chapter 80: Spirit Of Exploration

The nest was spherical in shape, with a round hole at the center of it. Usually, such a nest would be made out of grass and twigs, but this one was constructed from the branches of the great tree, each at least as thick as a man's arm. These branches were twisted and interwoven together in a chaotic pattern, creating gapless, onyx-black walls.

Sunny had never seen anything like it. Birds were a rare sight in the real world, let alone giant ones. The size of the entrance into the nest was large enough for a small truck to pass through. The nest itself was several times bigger.

'Wow.'

For a second, he felt a sense of fear, afraid that the giant bird was somewhere near. But then his fears disappeared.

The nest looked... abandoned. It was ancient and empty, some of its parts already on the verge of collapse. It was as though thousands of years had passed since anyone had been in this hidden, secretive place. The air was filled with the feeling of lonesomeness and desolation.

'Makes sense. If I barely managed to pass through the leaves, how would a giant monster do it without leaving a giant hole in the barrier?'

Sunny hesitated, caution and curiosity wrestling against each other inside his heart. On one hand, exploring ancient nests was not the best of ideas anywhere, let alone inside the Dream Realm. It posed great risks.

On the other hand, it also could lead to a great reward. Plus... wasn't it just too damn interesting?

In the end, Sunny decided to climb inside the nest to satiate his curiosity. He had convinced himself that it was safe following an unexpected train of thought. In his warped state of mind, Sunny was convinced that the Soul

Tree was a great and benevolent being, one that protected them from the terrible threats hiding in the outside world.

If so, how could anything having to do with the great tree be unsafe?

Moving closer to the entrance of the nest, he balanced on the edge of the branch and tried to look inside. However, he wasn't tall enough to see anything except for the inner side of the nest's roof. Since his position was pretty precarious, Sunny decided not to delay the inevitable and jumped, throwing himself up and over the lip of the entrance.

A moment later, he landed on a soft surface. The lower part of the nest was covered in a thick cushion of white, silky spiderwebs. Time had made them brittle and pliable like sand. There was so much spiderweb around that, for a moment, Sunny thought that he had fallen into a giant white cocoon.

But no, it was just a nest.

And there, in the center of it, was a...

Sunny blinked.

At the center of the nest, there was an egg. A giant, ancient egg that was as tall as he was, grey and seemingly lifeless, as though turned to stone by the passage of time.

Forgetting to breathe, Sunny looked around, making sure that there was nothing... and no one... else around. But no, the giant nest was empty and silent, with not even a stray shadow hiding anywhere in sight.

'How... fascinating.'

Sunny felt strangely excited. The feeling of discovering something incredible, something that no one except for him had ever seen, filled him with a deep sense of wonder and satisfaction. He had never known that there was such a side to him, one full of an explorer's passion.

'Let's check this thing out.'

Walking on the soft silk, Sunny slowly circled the massive egg and studied it. At a first glance, it seemed to be made of stone. The surface of the egg was colored in various shades of grey, which were overlaid over each other like moving clouds. This pattern was strangely beautiful, giving the egg a mysterious aura. But overall, it was just big and smooth.

Sunny scratched the back of his head, then stepped closer and put his hand on the surface of the egg. Immediately, he felt a strong sense of astonishment.

The egg was warm to the touch.

'Is it... still alive?'

In the next second, Sunny felt a strange pull affecting his core. It was as though the egg was... was trying to steal his life force!

He jerked his hand away and looked at the egg with dark apprehension. The damned thing was not only alive, but also capable of sucking the life out of anything that touched it. It only failed to eat his soul because of one reason.

As far as Sunny knew, he was the only existence in two worlds without an actual soul core. He had the mysterious Shadow Core instead. That's why his life force had not been affected.

'Phew. That was close.'

Looking at the giant egg, Sunny thought about how to get back at it.

The nest, without a doubt, once belonged to an extremely powerful Nightmare Creature. Therefore, its spawn was also a being of considerable strength. However, due to some unknown reason, that being had not been able to hatch and was left behind by its parent, destined to remain trapped within the egg for all eternity.

...Or at least until some unfortunate fool came close enough to feed it with soul essence and give it enough power to break free.

'Luckily, I'm not a fool. Wait... uh... maybe I am...'

His decisions have been very strange lately. He couldn't quite explain some of them, including this latest one. It was as though his thinking ability had been reduced...

'Whatever. I'm still smarter than a damn egg!'

Like a true explorer, he went where no one had gone before and made an incredible discovery. He found an unbelievably mysterious, rare being, one that not a single human had ever heard of.

Naturally, he had to kill it.

That's what the spirit of exploration was all about, wasn't it?

Summoning the Midnight Shard, Sunny thrust it into the stone surface of the egg, causing a rain of sparks to fall on the spiderwebs. The sharp blade slid harmlessly across the stone, leaving only a shallow scratch on it.

'Tough bastard.'

The egg was sturdy enough to withstand a strike from an Awakened weapon. If it was that resilient, Sunny was scared to imagine how powerful the adult monster would be. It was definitely not an average Nightmare Creature.

But then, he was not an average Sleeper.

His shadow flowed from his hands onto the Midnight Shard, turning the polished metal of the blade black and lusterless. Immediately, a cold aura radiated from the sword, making it feel sharp enough to cut the world apart.

Stepping forward, Sunny raised the Shard above his head and sliced down, delivering a crushing blow. Enhanced by the shadow, the dark blade bit into the stone surface of the egg and split it apart.

Cracks ran through the giant stone egg as Sunny's sword plunged into it. A flash of sinister crimson light shined through the cracks, then disappeared, leaving behind nothing but darkness. A torrent of viscous, black liquid flowed onto the white spiderwebs.

In the ensuing silence, Sunny heard the Spell's bewitching voice:

[You have slain a Great Devil, Vile Thieving Bird's Spawn.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

[You have received a Memory...]

Chapter 81: Weaver's Eye | Shadow Slave

Sunny blinked.

[You have received a Memory: Drop of Ichor.]

'Wait a moment... wait a moment...'

A Great Devil? He gulped.

Nightmare Creature with four soul cores was called a devil, just one class below the dreaded tyrant. From that detail alone, the evil ancient egg had been potentially more powerful than the Carapace Demon.

However, what shocked him the most was its rank, not class.

The quality of most things having to do with the Nightmare Spell followed a similar hierarchy, from Dormant to Awakened, Ascended, Transcendent, Supreme, Sacred and Divine.

Humans had only ever managed to reach the Transcendent rank. These heroes were known as Saints, each wielding an unimaginable amount of power and leading humanity in its war against the Nightmare Creatures.

The Nightmare Creatures, too, were different from each other in a similar fashion, with seven ranks of power. They were, in order of growing strength: Dormant, Awakened, Fallen, Corrupted, Great, Cursed and Unholy.

A Great Devil, therefore, was a Nightmare Creature with four soul cores, each one of the Great rank. Which were the same in terms of power as a Supreme soul core would have been if a human ever managed to pass the Fourth Nightmare and rise one step above the Saints.

...Sunny had just killed one of the most powerful Nightmare Creatures to ever fall by a human hand. At least as far as he knew. Victories against the Great Devils were rare enough to be of historic importance.

'Uh...'

What a stroke of luck, to find one absolutely defenseless, yet to be fully born and weakened by thousands of years of neglect. Not to mention the fact that he was probably the only human alive to be partially immune to the egg's terrifying life-sucking powers.

'Wait... how many shadow fragments did I get?'

Sunny felt stronger... a lot stronger...

He was used to receiving two fragments for each awakened beast he killed. Thus, it was fair to assume that a Fallen beast would give him four, a Corrupted beast would give him eight, and a Great beast would give him sixteen — forgetting the ridiculousness of the notion that a Sleeper would ever be able to slay a great beast.

However, the Vile Thieving Bird's Spawn was not a beast, it was a devil. It had four cores, so... sixty-four fragments?!

Dumbstruck, Sunny summoned the runes. In his excited state, he even disregarded the insistent forgetfulness that prevented him from doing so earlier.

Shadow Fragments: [196/1000].

After seeing the number, he was giddy with joy at first. But then, Sunny frowned.

'Wait, that doesn't make any sense. I had ninety-six fragments before coming to the Ashen Barrow. I received sixty-four just now, that makes it hundred and sixty. Where did the additional thirty-six fragments come from? From the fruits? No way... we've been eating them for less than a week, one fruit a day. To get that much... a whole month would have to pass...'

But how could so much time pass without him noticing? Yes, his memory was strange lately... but...

Sunny tried to concentrate on the discrepancy, but it was very hard, for some reason. The more he thought about it, the less clear he became on what exactly he was thinking about.

'Uh... what was I trying to remember? Something about the shadow fragments? Yeah...'

A few minutes later, he massaged his temples and sighed in frustration.

'I guess I was trying to calculate how many fragments I got from killing that vile egg. It's sixty-four. What is there to think about? That is great!'

He would spend more time celebrating the insane amount of shadow fragments he had received, but there was another amazing thing waiting for his attention.

A Memory. He had actually received a Memory from a Great Devil! A real, actual Supreme Memory of the fourth tier. That was... that was...

'Fantastic!'

Sunny summoned the runes once more and looked at his Memories.

Memories: [Silver Bell], [Puppeteer's Shroud], [Midnight Shard], [Drop of Ichor].

Hurriedly, he concentrated on the new one.

Memory: [Drop of Ichor].

Memory Rank: unknown

Memory Type: unknown

Memory Description: [The loathsome Thieving Bird was hated both by the gods and -unknown-. However, it only cared about shiny things. Enamored by Weaver's beautiful eyes, it stole one of them on a dark, starless night. Impatient, the vile creature looked at its bounty while still in flight. However, when it saw the reflection of -unknown- forever frozen in the

depths of Weaver's pupil, it went mad and screamed, dropping the eye on the mortal realm below. All that was left in its greedy beak was one drop of pure, golden ichor.]

Sunny frowned.

What the hell was that?

He had never heard of a Memory with an unknown rank and type. How was this even possible? Did the Spell really not know or was it simply refusing to let him know? Why would it do that?

And the description itself... what were these words that it failed to translate? He tried to forego the automatic translation and look at the runes themselves, but they were beyond his ability to translate. In fact, he had never seen runes of this type before. Weirdly, studying them caused him to feel dizzy and nauseated.

'That is... very, very weird.'

Also, to his shame, Sunny had to admit that he had no idea what the word "ichor" meant. It simply wasn't in his vocabulary. Maybe if he went to school and got an education like other Sleepers, he would know.

Sunny hesitated for a minute or two, then cautiously summoned the strange Memory. Instantly, golden sparks of light appeared in the air in front of him, coalescing into a spherical drop of radiant, golden liquid.

'What am I supposed to do with thi...'

Before he finished his thought, the Spell spoke again. Its voice sounded a bit strange. It was almost... excited?

[You have acquired a drop of ichor. Do you wish to consume it?]

Sunny blinked.

Consume... a Memory?

Things were getting weirder and weirder.

He hesitated.

What was going to happen if he did consume it? Memories were rewards given by the Spell to the Awakened. As such, they were usually useful, very rarely useless, and never harmful. At least that was the common knowledge. However... this one was out of the ordinary. And it was the Spell he was talking about. The damn thing was nothing if not unpredictable... usually with catastrophic consequences.

The safest approach would be to put the golden liquid back into his Soul Sea and never touch it again.

But it was a Memory received from a Great Devil! Chances were he would never hold another one in his whole life, not even in his dreams.

Sunny was simply unwilling to let this opportunity go.

Trying to calm his rapidly beating heart, he licked his lips and said:

"Yes. I want to consume it."

[As you wish.]

The golden sphere separated into two streams of beautiful, radiant liquid. The streams flowed through the air, approaching Sunny's face. He felt a gentle touch caress his cheeks.

Then, the golden liquid reached his eyes and flowed through them, entering his soul through the pupils.

Soon, it was gone.

Sunny was frozen, not knowing what to expect.

A second passed, then another.

He raised his trembling hands to his face, finally feeling something.

In the next moment, Sunny opened his mouth and let out a terrible, wailing shriek as unimaginable, blinding pain tore through his entire being.

Chapter 82: Fear Of The Unknown

Sunny fell into the soft embrace of spiderwebs, screaming, his whole body convulsing in spasms of terrible pain. The unbearable agony radiated through his nervous system, his mind drowning in the endless torrent of torturous, excruciating, harrowing suffering.

It felt as though every muscle, every fiber, every molecule of his body was being torn apart and reassembled, only to be torn apart again. His eyes, especially, felt as though there were two white-hot metal rods inserted in them, making all the other pain pale in comparison. Or maybe they had become searing spheres of molten metal themselves...

He clawed at his face, leaving bloody marks on it. However, seconds later they were already gone, erased by some unknown force. His voice was soon gone, too, leaving Sunny without an outlet to express his horrible torment.

The process was the opposite of the gentle rebirth he had experienced after passing the First Nightmare. It was violent, ruthless and unnatural, forcefully reshaping Sunny's body into something that it was not meant to be.

That nothing was ever meant to be.

Powerless to stop it, Sunny had no choice but to endure the agony. All he could do was try not to go mad from pain. Tears were streaming down his face, leaving bloody trails in their wake. There was no end to torture.

...Then, after what felt like an eternity, there was. The pain subsided, lessened, and finally vanished. Sunny was left lying on the thick carpet of spiderwebs, utterly drained and depleted.

In the silence that was broken only by the hoarse sound of his ragged breathing, the Spell's voice whispered:

[You have acquired a new Attribute.]

[One of your Attributes is ready to evolve.]

Sunny remained motionless for a long time, slowly coming back to his senses. The memory of the terrible ordeal was still echoing in his mind, making him shudder from time to time. He was afraid to open his eyes and look at his body, afraid to see himself changed in some horrific, repulsive way.

'Have I become a monster?'

Feeling a sense of dread, Sunny shut his eyes tighter.

However, he did not feel like a monster. In fact, he didn't feel different at all. From what he could tell, he still had two hands, two legs, and soft human skin. There was no change in his strength and resilience.

It was as though nothing had happened.

'Come on. Just do it...'

With a nervous sigh, Sunny opened his eyes and looked himself over. Everything was the same. He shifted his perception and studied himself again through the shadow.

He was still human.

Well... something did change, but he couldn't quite describe it. It was as though his vision was slightly different from before. The world seemed... deeper, somehow. Sunny only noticed the difference because of the contrast between his own perception and that of the shadow.

Previously, they were more or less similar.

'A drop of ichor... that came from the Weaver's eye...'

Carefully, he raised a hand and touched his eyes. They felt the same.

But they were also different. He just couldn't understand in what way.

Lowering his hand, Sunny noticed a drop of blood on one of his fingers. It came from a small scratch on his cheek, one that had not healed like the others.

Deep inside his blood, Sunny noticed a barely visible hint of the golden shine. As if the radiant drop of golden liquid he had absorbed was still there, now a part of him, strongly diluted and fused into his own bloodstream. The shine was so faint that he had almost missed it.

Sunny suspected that in the light, it wouldn't be visible at all.

'What... the hell... have I done to myself?'

That was the moment when he accidentally glanced at the Puppeteer's Shroud, simultaneously thinking about the golden shine. Something switched in Sunny's head, and suddenly, he saw the Memory differently.

His eyes widened.

Under the surface of the grey fabric, five glowing embers were shining with ethereal light. Each of them represented a nexus and anchor of countless diamond strings that stretched to different parts of the armor, weaving an intricate, elaborate, unpredictable pattern.

It looked a lot like the inner void of the Spell, only at an infinitely smaller scale.

However... Sunny was surprised to find out that he sort of understood the pattern. A newly found innate knowledge helped him sense the traces of logic behind the seemingly chaotic placement of the strings, a defined purpose behind every twist and turn. They were meant to achieve certain effects... durability, resilience... and another, more complex type of protection.

The hint of understanding came naturally to him, as though it was his innate ability.

'I need to... study this further.'

Intrigued and apprehensive, he entered the Soul Sea. A familiar dark expanse of still water appeared in front of his mind's eye. There was the looming Shadow Core, the shining satellites of his Memories, and the strange feeling that something was moving just beyond the periphery of his vision.

Out of habit, Sunny turned his head to try and catch sight of that something, knowing that he would not see anything.

However, this time, he did.

With a startled yelp, Sunny flinched away and lost his balance.

'What the hell! What the actual hell!'

Out there in the darkness, at the border of the dim light cast by the shining Memories, stood motionless black figures. They were shadows... shadows of creatures he had killed.

There was a shadow that resembled the slave with broad shoulders and bloodied back, one whose name Sunny had never bothered to learn. His figure was deformed and horrifying, as he had been transformed into a murderous beast after becoming the host of a Mountain King's Larva. That Larva was then strangled by Sunny.

The shadow of the Mountain King itself was towering above him, just as dreadful and abhorrent as the tyrant had been when still alive. Sunny shuddered as he remembered escaping from the horrid creature's claws.

The shadow of the cruel slaver that had hit him with the whip was also there, standing beside the tyrant. This was the first, and for now the only, human whose life Sunny had ended with his own two hands. He even stole the boots and cloak of the dead man's body.

On both sides of them, there were other shadows. Hulking carapace scavengers stood silently, their pincers lowered to the ground. A fearsome

centurion's savage silhouette could be seen among them, surrounded by the giant centipedes, bulbous knots of carnivorous worms and a few strange, maneating flowers.

Every single being that had fallen by Sunny's hand was there in the form of a shadow. Or, to be more precise, every being whose shadow's fragments had been absorbed by him.

Despite the fact that shadows had no eyes, he couldn't help but feel that they were all staring at him...

Silent, motionless. Watching.

Feeling cold shivers running down his spine, Sunny gulped and stood up, his legs shaking a little. Finding out that a small army of dead shadows had appeared inside your Soul Sea was not the most pleasant of surprises. Let alone if those shadows once belonged to creatures who you had personally slain.

He clenched his teeth.

'Can I repeat... what the actual hell?!'

Chapter 83: Five | Shadow Slave

The shadows stared at Sunny, and Sunny stared at the shadows.

After a while, the situation became a bit awkward.

Sunny shifted a little, then hesitantly asked:

"Uh... are you guys not going to do anything?"

The shadows did not react, remaining as motionless and quiet as they had been from the start.

As a matter of fact, he didn't see them move or show any sign of life at all. In that regard, they were even more lifeless than his Echo had been here in the Sea of Soul. Sunny scratched his head.

His initial fear was slowly disappearing. At first, he was scared out of his wits, but more so from being startled than from feeling an actual threat. This was his Soul Sea, after all. Very few things could harm him here.

Sunny was pretty sure that the shadows were not capable of doing anything, let alone attacking him. They seemed more like manifestations of some weird facet of his Aspect rather than actual beings. As such, they weren't dangerous.

The question was... why did the shadows suddenly appear?

After briefly thinking about it, Sunny came to the conclusion that they did not actually appear, per se. Instead, they were always here, it's just that he had not been able to see them.

But now, with his eyes changed by the strange transformation he had gone through, he could, just like he could see the diamond strings inside the Puppeteer's Shroud.

Speaking of the Puppeteer's Shroud...

Glancing at the silent shadows one last time to make sure that they would not lunge at him, Sunny frowned with suspicion and turned away. His back instantly began to tingle.

'Just think of them as fashionable pieces of furniture. Who says Soul Seas don't need a touch of interior design?'

Somewhat consoled, he walked closer to the shining spheres that represented Memories and summoned the Puppeteer's Shroud. One of the spheres floated down and slowly dimmed, revealing the armor within.

Just like before, Sunny could see five glowing nexuses and countless strings permeating the grey fabric. They resembled miniature stars assembled into a constellation.

'The Shroud came from a tyrant, which is a class of Nightmare Creatures with five soul cores. Five soul cores, fifth tier Memory, five nexuses... makes sense.'

For some reason, the number five moved something in his mind. Sunny scowled, not understanding the feeling of unease that suddenly appeared out of nowhere and disrupted the flow of his thoughts.

Trying to concentrate on the task at hand, he summoned the runes describing the Puppeteer's Shroud. The familiar description appeared in the air around the armor:

Memory: [Puppeteer's Shroud].

Memory Rank: Awakened.

Memory Tier: V.

Memory Type: Armor.

Memory Description: [A worm of doubt...]

The identification of the tier was new. It seems that the Spell decided to be helpful and incorporated Sunny's new understanding of the inner workings

of Memories into its... uh... interface?

Tiers were not something that humans had learned from the Spell. Instead, it was just an improvised way of differentiating Memories of different power levels within the same rank. It was often unreliable and outright wrong, but it was better than nothing.

But in the case of Sunny, the information was one hundred percent true. He could confirm it with his own two eyes just by counting the number of core remnants inside a Memory. He could even understand their purpose.

'That might be extremely useful!'

However, his attention was drawn to something else. At the very bottom of the description, a new cluster of runes appeared.

Memory Enchantments: [Enhanced Durability], [Doubtless].

Sunny smiled. That was what he was hoping for. Previously, he had only been able to intuitively sense the special qualities of his Memories, with no way to learn their true nature and limits except for the trial and error approach. And using that method during a battle was not conducive to survival.

Now, however...

He concentrated on one of the enchantments.

Enchantment: [Doubtless].

Enchantment Description: [Provides the wearer with a small amount of protection against mind attacks.]

'Good to know.'

The amount was "small" because it was just an Awakened Memory. Since "enhanced durability" was self-explanatory, Sunny dismissed the Puppeteer's Shroud and summoned the Silver Bell.

The small bell had only one spark of light, which was much less bright than the ones inside the Puppeteer's Shroud, at that. Studying the runes did not show anything interesting. It was a tier one dormant Memory with a single enchantment that increased the range at which its ringing could be heard to several kilometers.

Finally, it was time to take a look at the Midnight Shard. The graceful blade appeared in front of Sunny in all its austere beauty.

Memory: [Midnight Shard].

Memory Rank: Awakened.

Memory Tier: III.

Memory Description: [Forged from the shard of a fallen star, this stalwart blade is firm and unyielding. It favors those who are willing to fight to the last drop of blood and knows no surrender.]

Memory Enchantments: [Unbroken].

Enchantment Description: [This blade refuses to be broken, and thus is durable beyond reason. It will greatly enhance the power of its wielder when they are close to death, however only if the wielder is unwilling to surrender.]

Sunny sighed, simultaneously satisfied and disappointed. Now he knew how to access the well of power that hid in the deepest parts of his heart when the Midnight Shard was in his hand. However, it could only be done when he was at the death's door, wounded and minutes away from perishing. It could either save him from a dire situation or create an opportunity for a very heroic last stand.

Sunny did not care for heroics, so the second option did not seem appealing at all. The first one was much more useful, but only in the case of him screwing up terribly and getting himself in a lethal amount of trouble.

In other words, it could only be used if he failed. In normal battles, the special qualities of the Midnight Shard were of no use at all.

'A pity. But... an ace in your sleeve in case things really go south is not bad either.'

Done with his Memories, Sunny was ready to learn of the new Attribute he had received. Considering how much pain he had to go through to acquire the damn thing, he had pretty high expectations.

Looking for the cluster of runes representing his Attributes, Sunny focused his attention and carefully read their names.

There were five Attributes: [Fated], [Mark of Divinity], [Child of Shadows] and the new one, [Blood Weave].

Sunny was about to summon the description of the [Blood Weave], but then stopped.

Something was not right.

Something did not add up.

The feeling of unease from before had returned, now much stronger.

When did he first feel it?

For some reason, his thoughts were slow and murky. He felt a strong inclination to forget all about the strange feeling and concentrate on something else.

But this time, he did not.

'It was... when I was studying the Puppeteer's Shroud. And it was... connected... to the number five.'

Five? What meaning was there to the number five?

With his attention beginning to wane, Sunny bit his lip, causing drops of blood to roll down. A burst of pain cleared his mind for a moment.

There were five Attributes... [Fated], [Mark of Divinity], [Child of Shadows], and [Blood Weave].

'What?'

There were... five... five Attributes!

But he only counted four.

Bewildered, Sunny stared at the runes.

He was sure that there was a fifth Attribute. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't read its name and description. Every time his gaze fell on the runes corresponding to the fifth Attribute, he would find himself distracted, his memory wiped clean of any mention of it.

Just remembering that there were five Attributes was incredibly hard. Clenching his teeth, Sunny tried to keep his concentration, not allowing himself to be distracted.

He was not going to forget!

"Five! It's five! There's five of them, damn it!"

Immediately after he said those words out loud, something changed. It was as though an invisible veil had fallen from his eyes. Or, rather, from his mind.

Sunny froze, shock and fear permeating his heart. He was remembering...

'Didn't I... didn't I see a dream?'

Yes, of course... he saw Cassie standing over him with panic in her eyes. Begging him to remember the number five.

No, wait...

Was that a dream? At the time, he believed so.

But then, he forgot.

Just as he had forgotten what actually happened on that day.

On the day when Cassie woke him up to tell him something important...

Chapter 84: Black Seed | Shadow Slave

It happened on the day they killed the Carapace Demon. Back then, all three of them were utterly exhausted. After moving away from the corpse of the giant creature and finding a good hiding spot, they fell to the ground and immediately fell asleep.

But they didn't stay asleep for long.

An hour or two later, Sunny was shaken awake by Cassie, who was holding him by the shoulders. There was an expression of terror written clearly on her face.

"Sunny! Sunny! Wake up!"

Instantly coming back to his senses, he jumped to his feet and summoned the Midnight Shard, afraid that they were under attack.

However, there was no one around except for panicked Cassie and wary Nephis, who was in a similar pose, her sword raised and ready to strike.

Confused, Sunny looked at the blind girl.

"Cassie? What's the matter?"

Grabbing him by the shoulders again, she brought her face close and whispered in a begging tone:

"Sunny, you have to stop it! Please! You are the only one who can!"

He frowned, failing to understand what exactly he was supposed to stop.

'Did she see another vision?'

Trying to calm her, he said in a measured tone:

"It's alright, Cassie. Slow down, breathe. Tell us what happened. Start from the beginning..."

She desperately shook her head.

"There's no time! I will forget soon! We all will! But you, you have to remember!"

'We will all forget soon? What does she mean?'

Not able to see Sunny's dazed expression, Cassie yelled:

"You have to remember, Sunny! Five! It's five! Remember! You have to remember! It's five!"

Remember... five?

The blind girl was not making any sense. Sunny carefully put his arm around her, feeling how scared she was from her shaking body.

"Alright, Cas. I promise I'll remember. Five, right? See, it's pretty hard to forget."

Nephis was looking at them with a frown, not neglecting to scan the surroundings for any signs of danger from time to time. For some reason, Cassie was only talking to Sunny, not paying her any attention.

What was it that she thought Sunny could do, but Changing Star could not?

Hearing his answer, the blind girl calmed down a little. However, she was still terrified.

"Good. Good. Remember, it's five. You promised..."

Her voice sounded quieter and quieter, as though she was not sure of what she was saying. Sunny was barely able to discern her mumbling.

"...the more complex a thought, the harder it will be to hold on to it. That's why I can only tell you this one word, the simplest thing to impart... when

the right time comes, it might change things..."

Carefully choosing his words, Sunny hesitantly asked:

"Cassie? Can you tell us what happened, exactly?"

Hearing his voice, the blind girl flinched and raised her head to face him.

There were still traces of fear in her eyes, but mostly, it had been replaced by confusion.

"Huh? Did something happen?"

Sunny blinked.

Wasn't she the one who woke them up in a panic?

'Wait... why did she wake us up, to begin with?'

For some reason, he had trouble remembering the details of the past few minutes. The conversation they just had was already hazy in his memory.

'I guess I'm still groggy from waking up so abruptly. Lack of sleep affects concentration...'

"You wanted to tell us something. It had to do with the... uh... number five?"

Cassie raised her eyebrows.

"Five? Why five?"

Sunny didn't know what to say. He was going to ask the same question.

"I have no clue."

Perplexed, he looked at Nephis, hoping that she will be able to clear the situation.

Changing Star was standing a few steps away with a distracted expression on her face. Sensing his gaze, she stared at him and asked:

"Why do you have your sword out?"

Sunny glanced at the Midnight Shard and tried to remember what had caused him to summon the Memory.

"Uh... I'm not sure. Why did you summon yours?"

Nephis looked down, as though noticing the sword in her hands for the first time. An expression of doubt appeared on her face.

'What's wrong with our heads today?'

Understanding that it was pointless to expect help from Nephis, Sunny sighed and turned back to Cassie:

"Did you see another vision?"

The blind girl trembled. Her eyes opened wide, once again filled with fear.

"A vision... yes, I saw a vision. An awful, awful vision..."

"What did you see?"

She was silent for a few moments, trying to remember. A deep frown appeared on her face. Finally, Cassie quietly said:

"I saw... a mountain... a mountain of corpses. Countless bodies piled on each other until they formed a bloodsoaked hill. And at the top of it, a tiny black seed was floating in a pool of blood... "

She grew silent, then continued:

"That was the past, I think. But then I saw the future... a future. It was us. Oh, gods! We were... we were..."

Her voice trembled. As though not daring to say something aloud, Cassie stopped.

Sunny waited for a while, then carefully asked:

"We were what?"

The blind girl turned to him in confusion.

"What?"

He scratched the back of his head. What were they just talking about?

"You were... uh... telling us about your vision. I think?"

Cassie frowned.

"...What vision?"

To his embarrassment, Sunny wasn't sure either. He just remembered something about the number five and... a seed?

For some reason, he felt as though that number was very important. But why? He had no idea.

"I forgot."

Suddenly, Nephis, who was standing nearby, lowered her hands and dismissed the sword that she had been holding for some reason. Looking at them with a bit of confusion, she hesitantly asked:

"Why are you guys awake? We need to rest. Something might get attracted by the demon's corpse, so we'd better return to peak condition as soon as possible."

Distracted and already forgetting about the conversation with Cassie, Sunny blinked a couple of times, shrugged, and decided to go back to sleep. None of this made sense anyway. They were probably struck dumb by exhaustion...

He felt so tired.

...A few hours later, when the shadow noticed the winged creature circling around the island, he awoke again. By that time, the memory of Cassie's warning was so fragmented and hazy that it seemed like a strange dream.

But the seed was already planted deep into his subconscious.

And now that it had blossomed, Sunny was finally able to fight through the haze of oblivion and remember everything.

Chapter 85: One Step At A Time

Sitting inside the Vile Thieving Bird's nest, Sunny frowned and clenched his fists.

Something unnatural was happening to them ever since they came to the Ashen Barrow. Now that he had remembered Cassie's warning, it was apparent that their minds were affected, making them forgetful and easily distracted.

Even now that he knew about it, thinking straight was strangely hard. It took all of his will just to keep the knowledge of the anomaly in his memory.

The events of these past few days were still hazy. Remembering something else, Sunny closed his eyes in frustration.

Had they really spent mere days on this island? The number of shadow fragments he received from eating Soul Tree fruits suggested otherwise. It was quite possible that as much as a whole month had passed since the first time they ate them.

And their minds were corroded a bit more with every day that passed. Pretty soon, there would be nothing left of them at all. Only empty shells, walking around wearing their faces.

Sunny's face paled.

With a growing feeling of dread, he realized that there were large gaps in his memory. He could not remember how they got to the Ashen Barrow, and where they were going. Other things, too, were unclear and blurry.

'Stay calm.'

Despite how compromised his memory was, there were still ways to understand what was going on, and then maybe undo it. After all, he was

able to remember Cassie's warning. That meant that their memories were not gone, just obfuscated.

'First step: resist the impulse to forget everything again.'

Not succumbing to the constant pull on his mind was not an easy task, but he was able to manage, at least for now.

'Second step: try to understand the reason why you were able to remember these things.'

When Cassie begged him to remember the number five, she must have already known that he would receive a new Attribute. He had noticed the existence of the mysterious fifth Attribute as the result, which triggered the frightening revelation.

However, why was he able to not forget about the existence of the fifth Attribute altogether?

What made him so special? Cassie had even said that he was the only one who could do it. Why him and not Changing Star?

Sunny massaged his temples. Then, a sudden realization came to him.

'Doubtless!'

One of the enchantments of the Puppeteer's Shroud was providing him with a small amount of resistance against mind attacks. That's why he was slightly less susceptible to the frightening forgetfulness that infected them on the Ashen Barrow.

That was the reason why he had been the last one to agree to eat the "miraculous" fruits. Why he had often felt that things were wrong. He was also the only one who had managed to remember Cassie's warning, even if it took him a long time.

Cassie knew about the Puppeteer's Shroud, and that's why she had chosen him instead of Nephis.

'Smart girl.'

So... their warped state was the result of a mind attack. But who could attack them on this desolate island?

The answer was pretty obvious.

'That damned tree!'

Looking down, Sunny felt cold sweat running down his back.

The Soul Tree was, in fact, a colossal, ancient and utterly horrifying Nightmare Creature. If he was right, then its power had to be simply unimaginable. He was afraid to even think about what its rank and class were.

'No wonder it was able to drain a whole area of the crimson labyrinth of all life.'

No wonder it was able to survive and thrive in this hellish place. Of all the horrors in this hell, it might have been the most terrifying.

Finally, Sunny knew the reason why no other Nightmare Creature dared to approach the Ashen Barrow. Even monsters were afraid of the Soul Tree.

...Except for equally harrowing things that dwelled beneath the waves of the deep, dark sea.

There was no way for them to destroy it. The Soul Tree was just too big, old and powerful. For a moment, Sunny entertained the idea of setting it on fire, but quickly abandoned it. He would need a volcanic eruption or some sort of divine intervention to burn that colossus down.

'So... what to do?'

After thinking for some time, Sunny decided not to be hasty and move forward one step at a time.

First, he had to know the exact situation with his Attributes.

Summoning the runes, he tried once again to read the description of the hidden fifth Attribute.

The result was the same. He knew it was there, but could not remember what it was no matter how much he tried.

'Figures.'

Confirming that it was still impossible for him to solve that mystery on his own, Sunny moved his attention to the Mark of Divinity. New runes appeared under its description:

[Mark of Divinity] Attribute Description: "You bear a faint scent of divinity, as though someone briefly touched by it once, a long time ago."

[Mark of Divinity] is ready to evolve. Proceed?

Not wasting time, Sunny said "yes".

Immediately, the name and the description of the Attribute changed. The new runes read:

Attribute: [Spark of Divinity].

[Spark of Divinity] Attribute Description: "Every fire starts from a spark. Somewhere deep within your soul, a radiant spark shines with divine light."

He didn't feel any changes within himself. It seemed as though the question of whether or not he wanted to proceed was just a formality, and the Attribute already evolved back when he had consumed the drop of ichor.

'My affiliation to divinity has increased. Neat. Although I'm not sure how it might be useful...'

Was that spark of divinity the reason why he was now able to see the inner workings of Memories, as well as some other stuff like the shadows in his Soul Sea? If so, was it a universal trait of all Awakened with high divine affiliation, or just his?

For some reason, Sunny felt that it was the latter option. He had received the drop of ichor from a being called Weaver, and then became able to see the strings that were weaved through the Memories, giving them their unique qualities. It wasn't hard to see the connection.

If this was true, did it mean that there were different kinds of divinity? And he inherited a small amount of a very special kind of divinity?

Was Weaver even a deity? Every god he had heard about was named in a similar fashion. There was Shadow God, War God... well, that's it. He had never heard the names of any other god.

However, Weaver's name was different.

Maybe Weaver was not a deity at all...

Maybe he, she or it was actually one of the Unknown.

Sunny shook his head, feeling that he had almost allowed himself to get distracted and release the hold on his memory. He could not allow himself to go on tangents now...

Concentrating, he looked at his new Attribute, [Blood Weave.]

[Blood Weave] Attribute Description: "You have inherited a part of Weaver's forbidden lineage. Your blood has been altered and imbued with odd tenacity."

So... he would be less likely to bleed out in the future? That was a very nice enhancement.

However, it did not help Sunny with his current situation.

It was time for the next step...

It was early morning when Sunny descended from the Soul Tree. However, he didn't bring any fruit with him.

Walking over to sleeping Cassie, he took her by the shoulders and gently shook her awake. The irony of how this situation mirrored the one where Cassie had told Sunny to remember the number five was not lost on him.

The blind girl slowly came to her senses and turned to face him with a sleepy, confused expression.

"Sunny? Why are you up so early?"

He hesitated, then said with a friendly smile, trying very hard to act as though everything was alright.

"Actually, I didn't sleep at all this night."

Cassie frowned. Luckily, she could not see the sorry state he was in, nor the dried blood on his face.

"Really? Why?"

He shrugged.

"I decided to climb the Soul Tree and search for some fruits. But that's not very important. Hey... your Aspect Ability allows you to see other people's Attributes, right?"

She nodded, still confused.

"Yes. You know this. Why?"

Sunny lingered, then said in a carefree tone:

"Can you take a look at mine?"

Chapter 86: Final Clue | Shadow Slave

Sunny's thought process was very simple. Honestly, in the state he was in, complex ideas that went against Soul Tree's indoctrination were almost impossible to hold on to. He was already at his limits just trying to remember what had happened in the giant nest.

On his way down, Sunny had to bite himself several times, leaving bloody marks on his hands. Sharp pain cleared his mind for a few moments and gave him temporary relief from the constant pull of forgetfulness.

Coincidentally, he was already noticing the effect [Blood Weave] was exerting on him. The bites only bled for a short while, quickly turning into scabs. The speed of coagulation of his blood was clearly enhanced. He also felt more energetic, his endurance substantially better than it had been before.

Which made sense. The human body was a system where every part affected the other. A comprehensive improvement of one of these parts, especially one as important as blood, had to lead to a chain reaction of lesser improvements throughout the system.

It seemed that he had severely underestimated the importance of his new Attribute.

'Focus, idiot! No tangents!'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny concentrated on the task.

He wanted to use Cassie's Aspect Ability to learn the truth of the hidden Attribute. Her sight was different from his. Sunny could only see the information provided by the runes because it was a default function of the Spell. He simply accessed that information with his mind.

Cassie's sight, however, came from her Aspect. Thus, even if their minds were compromised, it should not have affected her ability to see other people's Attributes. She also had a high affinity to revelations and fate.

So, there was a high chance that Cassie would be able to succeed where he had failed.

Finally reaching the ground, Sunny woke the blind girl up and, after a short conversation, mentioned the Attributes. Then, he carefully asked:

"Can you take a look at mine?"

Cassie was visibly confused by this question.

"Can't you do it yourself?"

Sunny smiled.

"I can, but I think you'll be surprised when you see them."

The blind girl hesitated, then shrugged.

"Alright. But if it turns out that you woke me up for nothing, I'll be pretty upset. That was not very nice of you..."

She turned to face him and froze for a moment, as though staring into his eyes.

"Fated, Child of Shadows, Spark of Divinity... wait, wasn't it "mark" of divinity? Huh, I must have remembered wrong."

Stopping for a second, Cassie shyly covered her mouth with her small hand and yawned.

"Uh. My memory has not been too good lately. Too much rest, I guess. Where was I? Oh, yes. Blood Weave... huh? Where did this come from?"

Sunny forced a chuckle.

"This thing? From an egg. Anyway, is there something else?"

Cassie blinked a couple of times.

"An... egg? Well, if you say so..."

Usually, an appearance of a new Attribute was not something one would gloss over. But in the state she was in, Cassie's attention span was severely reduced, and her mental capacity was clouded. She just frowned for a second, then forgot all about the discrepancy.

Sunny's heart, meanwhile, was beating like it was going to explode. With a fake smile frozen on his face, he waited for the blind girl's next words. They were going to decide whether or not he would be able to get to the bottom of things.

And, therefore, find a way to rise from that bottom.

With an absentminded smile, Cassie said:

"My mom makes the best eggs... uh... what were we talking about? Right, your Attributes. The last one is Enthralled. Wait... where did this..."

Knowing that there was very little time, Sunny hurriedly asked:

"The description! What does the description say?"

A bit of tension sipped into his voice. Startled by this intensity, Cassie didn't ask the same question again and simply said:

"You've been mesmerized by the ancient fiend, Soul Devouring Tree, and are being turned into its thrall. Once the process is complete, there will be no escape."

As soon as Sunny heard these words, it was as though heavy chains fell from his mind. Suddenly, his memories returned in an avalanche, making him stagger. His eyes opened wide.

Only now that he had fully recovered his memory did Sunny realize the extent to which his mental state was warped, how much of his true self was gone, how close he came to being completely obliterated without even knowing that a terrible monster was slowly devouring his mind.

An extreme feeling of terror filled his heart. For a few moments, Sunny lost the ability to speak, covered in cold sweat and shaking.

'C—calm down. Calm down. It didn't happen, you stopped it. You're back, it didn't eat you.'

Slowly, he was able to get a grip on his feelings and achieve some semblance of composure. He came very close to the edge, but did not take the last step. He was still himself.

It wasn't over yet. They still had a chance.

Looking at Cassie, Sunny slowly exhaled and said.

"Thank you."

The blind girl smiled and raised her eyebrows.

"For what?"

She had already forgotten all about their conversation.

Sunny was free from being mesmerized by the Soul Devourer, by Cassie was not. Her memory, mind and thinking were still compromised. Turning worse as they spoke.

A pained smile appeared on Sunny's face. Struggling to keep his tone light and cheerful, he said:

"For helping me out just now. Sorry about waking you up so early... go back to sleep. I'll take it from here."

Cassie hesitated for a few moments, then got distracted and forgot that he was there at all. Yawning, the blind girl lay down and covered herself with her cloak. Soon, she was asleep again, happy and blissfully ignorant of the fact that her days were numbered.

Sunny watched her for a while, a grim expression on his face. Finally, he turned and walked away, thinking:

'Over my dead body.'

Chapter 87: Plan Of Escape

Nephis was still at the western edge of the island, gazing over the receding black waters. It seems as though she barely moved since the last time Sunny saw her.

Looking at her with clear eyes, free from the most debilitating effects of being Enthralled, he was able to notice things that he had not noticed before.

Neph's hair was indeed longer. Back at the Academy, it was short and usually parted to the side. Now silver strands were already long enough to cover her ears, hanging messily without their usual luster.

Changing Star's face seemed much thinner, with dark circles under her eyes and a bleak, dull expression. Her usual confidence and energy were gone, replaced by exhausted stillness.

She looked as though some unknown illness was consuming her from inside, slowly turning the once radiant girl into a pale shadow of her former self.

Sunny suspected that he knew what that illness was.

He had known for a long time that Nephis had a mysterious goal, and that her determination to achieve that goal was nothing short of frightening. That burning desire of hers, it seemed, was strong enough to resist even the enthrallment of the Soul Devourer.

However, while the feelings remained, the actual memories were gone. Thus, Nephis had been left longing desperately for something that she did not know, with no way to understand the nature of her emotions or satiate them. This inner conflict was the reason for her terrible state.

Coming closer, Sunny sat down and looked at Neph, wishing to see her striking grey eyes shine once again with unbreakable resolve.

"Hey, Neph."

She turned her head to him, not saying anything. Sunny gritted his teeth, feeling dark anger blossoming in his heart.

'That loathsome tree!'

"I have something to tell you."

Trying to stay calm and not miss anything, he told Nephis everything that he had found out. He told her about his trip to the upper parts of the Soul Tree, the giant nest he had discovered, the Vile Thieving Bird's Spawn and how he had killed it, the strange Memory with no rank and type, the new Attribute he had received and the hidden one he had accidentally discovered.

Finally, Sunny told her about the nature of that Attribute, the true nature of the Soul Devourer, how long they had been on the island, and what they had forgotten.

When he finished, Changing Star's expression didn't change one bit. Looking away, she simply said:

"I see."

Sunny blinked.

"I see? I see?! That's all you have to say?!"

She glanced at him and smiled darkly.

"What do you want me to say?"

He gaped at her and clenched his fists.

"Wow! How horrible! Good job, Sunny! Say something, at least! Is it so hard to behave like a human?!"

She turned away, not answering. Sunny stared at her for several seconds, then said in a tired, defeated voice:

"I don't know what to do. Tell me what to do, Neph. How do I get us out of this?"

She was silent for a while. Sunny almost assumed that Changing Star had already forgotten everything that he had told her, but then he noticed sparks of white radiance dancing in the depths of her eyes.

Nephis had activated her Aspect Ability, using pain to stay lucid for as long as possible.

Finally, she looked at the retreating dark sea and said:

"We need to build a boat."

Sunny blinked.

"What?"

Changing Star sighed and turned her face to look at him.

"We've been here, on this island, for many weeks. Our minds are slowly being erased by the Soul Tree, turning us into its slaves. Forever. However, the process is not complete."

He nodded, listening.

"What thoughts did the Soul Tree put in our heads? That it is benevolent and great. That its fruits are desirable. And that we shouldn't leave the island, staying as close to it as possible. The first two commands make perfect sense. The third, however, is not so simple."

Nephis gestured at the vast expanse of black water.

"From that third command, we can deduce that the effect of the Soul Tree's enthrallment weakens with range. And that if we put enough distance between ourselves and the tree, it will be broken."

Sunny's face brightened when he understood Neph's logic. So there was a way! They just had to leave the Ashen Barrow and flee, not looking back until the Soul Devourer's brand was gone from their souls. However...

"But why a boat? Why not just run away on foot?"

Changing Star lowered her head and said quietly:

"We'll never make it to the castle on foot. We'll just die. I was too arrogant before to think... well, it doesn't matter now. It will take many months to go around the crater through the labyrinth, especially now that we don't have the Echo. And every day we spend there is another day we risk encountering something that will kill us without even breaking a sweat."

She sighed.

"We were already lucky to survive for as long as we did. But in the end, no matter how much we fought and persevered, we still encountered the Soul Tree. This should have been our end. Do you know how improbable it is that we even got a chance to have this conversation?"

Sunny hesitantly shook his head.

"First, we had to have an oracle in our group to see the future. Then, Cassie had to formulate and execute an ingenious plan in the short amount of time her memory remained intact. That plan was based on the fact that there was someone with an awakened armor of fifth tier in our group, one enchanted with the extremely rare mind protection trait, no less...

Awakened with the revelation affinity were few and far between. Sleepers with a Memory equal to the Puppeteer's Shroud were even rarer.

"...That person then had to find and kill a Great Devil. More incredibly, he had to receive an actual Lineage Memory from it. Do I need to explain how implausible this combination of events is?"

Sunny slowly shook his head.

Nephis closed her eyes.

"My point is... If we go into the labyrinth, we will inevitably meet the next Soul Tree, and even if we miraculously manage to survive that encounter, there will be the next, and then the next. Sooner or later, we will die."

She looked west, where the last remnants of the dark sea were disappearing beyond the horizon.

"But if we build a boat and use Cassie's staff to fill the sail with wind... maybe we'll be eaten by the dwellers of the depths, or maybe they won't pay us any attention at all. It's a gamble either way. Either we die, which is the same as returning to the labyrinth, or not. If we survive, we'll be able to travel a hundred, maybe even two hundred kilometers in one night. More distance than we had covered so far."

Sunny froze, stunned by that number.

In all the weeks preceding their battle with the Carapace Demon, they had traveled for no more than a hundred, maybe one hundred and fifty kilometers from the giant knight's statue. It was a considerable amount, especially because of how hard each step through the crimson labyrinth had been.

To travel as much, perhaps even more in a single day... that would have been incredible. But...

Sail... on the dark sea?

Suddenly, he felt very cold and small.

Chapter 88: Boat Builders | Shadow Slave

Trying to gather his courage, Sunny looked into the distance and said in a raspy voice:

"You've seen the creatures that dwell under these waves. Do you really want to swim across them?"

Changing Star was silent for a few seconds, then sighed.

"We are damned either way, Sunny. What do we have to lose?"

She fell silent for a moment and grimaced, pale flames dancing in her eyes. Then, in a quiet voice, she added:

"We will not light any fires, relying on your eyes to guide us west. We will hope that Cassie's armor will protect us. Maybe it will be enough."

Sunny glanced at Neph and asked:

"What's so special about Cassie's armor?"

She hesitated for a moment, then answered without looking at him:

"It's a tier six awakened Memory. One of its traits is to make the wearer less likely to draw the enemy's attention."

While Sunny was digesting this information, Nephis suddenly trembled. Closing her eyes, she said through gritted teeth:

"I am at my limit. My mind is... fading. If you have any questions left... better... ask them fast."

He blinked, startled. Then, knowing that there was not much time left, Sunny asked the first thing that came to his mind:

"Do you even know how to build a boat?"

Changing Star simply nodded, letting him know that she did. Her expression was slowly turning lost and dull again.

Racing against time, Sunny frantically thought of another question.

"How do I convince you to leave the island once your memory is gone?"

Nephis looked at him, struggling to hold onto the last shreds of lucidity. For a moment, her eyes became clear again. White flames ignited in their depths, illuminating her pale, beautiful face.

"Aster... Song... Vale. Say those words to me, and I will listen."

Starting to lose the grip on her thoughts, she turned away and added after a short pause, her voice steady and even:

"If anything happens, take Cassie and flee. Don't... don't..."

Then, the light in her eyes slowly dimmed, and soon, Changing Star was staring west once again, all memory of their conversation gone from her mind.

Sunny sat by her side for some time, waiting. After a while, he shifted a little and said:

"Hey, Neph."

She turned to him, her face bleak and full of confusion.

"Sunny? Oh... when did you get here?"

"A while ago."

Then, he smiled and said in a carefree tone:

"Hey, can I ask you something? Do you know how to build a boat?"

Nephis was very surprised by his question, but eventually agreed to help him. Sunny didn't tell her why exactly he wanted to build a boat, dodging the questions with practiced finesse. His Flaw was not making things easy, but with the state Neph was in, persuading her was not very hard.

Manipulating her felt a little strange, but explaining everything once again would have taken too much time. Not to mention that he wasn't sure that it would work again.

And there was not much time left. With every hour, their condition worsened.

Even Sunny was having trouble keeping his lucidity intact. Every time he felt that his mind was beginning to slip, he had to inflict pain on himself to get a few moments of reprieve. Even so, his thoughts were slow and fragile. Keeping them together was taking a heavy toll on him.

They had to flee the island as soon as possible. Sunny was determined to be ready by the time the dark sea returned.

Turning away from Nephis to not let her see the pained expression on his face, Sunny bit his hand once again. Feeling the bitter taste of blood on his tongue, he let the wave of pain clear his mind and blinked, amused at the irony of the situation.

He was gnawing on himself to prevent himself from being eaten. What a funny contradiction.

Hiding his bleeding hand behind his back, Sunny turned to Neph and asked:

"So, how are we going to make the boat?"

She thought about it for some time, then said indifferently:

"We will have to use the materials at hand. For the hull, we will have to use the dead demon's carapace. We can strip several armor plates of suitable shape and tie them together with the golden rope..."

Sunny raised his eyebrows:

"The... the Carapace Demon's armor? It's made out of some strange steel. Can steel even float?"

Nephis glanced at him with reproach.

"Anything can float, Sunny. You just have to make sure that you're displacing more water than the weight of the floating object. That's how boats work."

He blinked.

"Ah... okay. About the sail, I think we can ask Cassie to lend us her cloak. What do you think?"

Changing Star gave him a strange look.

"I mean... yes? I still don't understand what got you so excited about boat building, but I'm sure she'll be willing to help you out with this... uh... passion project."

Sunny smiled.

"Great! Let's go butcher the demon, then!"

A strange sentence to say with a smile, but not the strangest one he had to say to convince Neph to help him.

A few minutes later, they reached the giant carcass of the Carapace Demon. It was towering above them like a small hill of polished metal. After that first day when the strange winged abominations had circled around the island for several hours, never daring to approach, nothing else had shown up to lay claim to the fearsome creature's meat.

As the result, the carcass was largely intact.

Strangely, the demon's corpse had not begun to rot. Only the metal of its carapace slowly deteriorated, losing its luster and shine, then turning less and less durable. By now, its surface was marred by large patches of rust.

Nephis climbed up on top of the carcass and walked from side to side, looking under her feet. Then, she gestured at several spots:

"These curved plates will be perfect if we can fit them together tight enough. Each one is long enough to form the entirety of the hull, leaving enough space for the three of us to sit side by side."

Sunny had no knowledge of shipbuilding, so he decided to trust her judgment. Looking up from the ground, he asked:

"What about the mast?"

Changing Star scowled.

"That... I will have to think about."

Sunny smiled.

"Alright. While you're thinking, I'll go fetch Cassie to keep you company..."

Chapter 89: Demon's Bones | Shadow Slave

Sunny had a lot to do before the sunset.

The parts of the plan spun in his head, making it ache. He had to constantly remain focused, straining his will to its limits, just to keep himself from forgetting everything. When it was not enough, he had to use pain to augment his concentration.

His hands and arms were covered in ghastly bite marks. Without the Blood Weave, Sunny might have fainted from blood loss already. Still, with his pale face turning even whiter from exhaustion and feverish light burning in his eyes, he must have looked like a zombie.

Luckily, Cassie couldn't see any of it.

It didn't take much to convince her to join their strange endeavor. The blind girl's state was way worse than his or Neph's. She seemed to be barely holding on, her thoughts slow and meek. Sunny's heart was gripped with worry.

'Why is she affected so much more than us? Is it because we have True Names, but she does not?'

Names were anchors of one's sense of self, after all. Could it be that True Names served a similar role, only in matters having to do with the Spell?

He didn't know.

Sunny guided Cassie to the carcass of the Carapace Demon. Nephis was already busy stripping plates of armor from its back. Her silver sword was seemingly able to cut through the deteriorated metal, making the task not as hard as he had been afraid of.

Gently sitting the blind girl down in a spot where Neph could see her, he climbed atop the dead demon and evaluated the progress of Changing Star's work.

She looked at him with a frown:

"Aren't you going to help? This was your idea, after all."

Sunny shrugged.

"Maybe later. You seem to be enjoying yourself, anyway. Some people might say that it's a fun little project to chase the boredom away, right?"

She blinked a couple of times, then said:

"I guess."

Sunny nodded a couple of times, looking down at the spots where, stripped of armor plates, the demon's flesh was laid bare. The azure blood had coagulated, turning it dark and as hard as stone. Here and there, though, white layers of fat remained in pristine condition.

"Actually, I have another project in mind."

Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"Oh really?"

Sunny summoned his sword and stepped closer to the gap in the creature's armor.

"Yeah. I want to make a candle."

Saying those words, he began to cut, separating the fat from the hardened muscle tissue.

Neph blinked a few times and then looked at Cassie:

"Hey, Cas. Has Sunny lost his mind?"

The blind girl perked up at the sound of her name.

"Huh? Uh... I'm not sure. I think he's just bored."

Sunny concentrated on his task, not paying them any attention. For a moment, he entertained the idea of cutting himself with the Midnight Shard's razor-sharp blade, but then dismissed it. Cutting through the Puppeteer's Shroud would have been really hard, and he couldn't dismiss the armor in front of the girls.

Well... to be more precise, he didn't want to.

With a sizable chunk of the demon's fat in his hands, Sunny jumped down from the carcass and landed on a pile of fallen leaves.

Making a candle out of animal fat was not very hard. He just needed fire, water, and time. The wick could be made out of seaweed fibers. It was not going to be pretty, but he didn't care about aesthetics.

Leaving Nephis and Cassie behind, Sunny rushed back to their camp.

The sun was already high in the sky.

He spent the rest of the day doing two things: watching over the process of making the candle and running around the island, gathering as much fallen leaves as he could.

From time to time, he would catch a glimpse of Nephis working on the boat, sometimes instructing Cassie to help her with menial tasks. From what he could see, the boat was coming along nicely. Changing Star knew what she was doing.

Of course, this was only possible because he had convinced her that this was just something he wanted to do for fun. In the girls knew that Sunny was planning to use the boat to escape the Ashen Barrow, the effects of enthrallment would have kept erasing their memories of the task, making finishing it impossible.

As it stood, Sunny was the only one who knew the true purpose of the boat. That's why he was forced to bear the full weight of Soul Tree's mind corruption alone.

He felt as though he was about to drop dead of exhaustion. His head felt like it was filled with molten iron. His vision was starting to become blurry.

But, stubbornly, Sunny refused to give up. No matter how tired he was, how much he wanted to let go and ease this suffering, returning to the bliss of not knowing, he kept his thoughts on one goal, and one goal only.

Escaping the clutches of the Soul Devourer.

Finally, with the evening approaching, the boat was ready.

Looking like a walking corpse, Sunny slowly approached the demon's carcass, which was now cut open and sliced apart. It was as though a mad vivisector had visited the island to perform an autopsy on the giant and forgot to sew the poor creature back up.

Nephis looked at him with concern.

"Sunny... are you alright?"

Giving her a crooked smile, he shrugged.

"I'm fine. Comparatively."

He did not specify what exactly he was comparing his current condition to.

Turning his head, Sunny looked at the boat with dark satisfaction.

It was... not how he had imagined it.

The hull was made out of curved plates of polished metal, with sharp spikes protruding from them in all directions. The plates were held together by the golden rope that was tied tightly around them. Changing Star had managed to make the gaps between the different parts of the hull so thin that no water could sip through.

The mast was made out of the demon's spine and ribs, with Cassie's enchanted cloak hanged on them to serve as the sail. There was even a steering oar, fashioned out of the tip of the giant's scythe.

He had expected to see a makeshift raft, but what met him was an actual vessel. Yes, it looked crude... but also strong, eerily macabre, and strangely impressive.

'Sailing upon the cursed sea on a boat made of demon bones... sound like the beginning of a legend,' he thought, temporarily mesmerized by the ghastly visage of the carapace vessel.

Nephis looked at him with a hint of satisfaction.

"Happy? Now what?"

Sunny gathered his thoughts.

'Now...'

As soon as he tried to think of what they had to do next, an invisible barrier appeared in his mind, blocking any attempt to continue that thought.

'Now we... we...'

No matter how hard he tried, Sunny couldn't quite remember what he wanted to do.

With a scowl, he raised his hand and bit down on his mangled palm, feeling drops of blood flowing into his mouth.

But even that pain did not help him destroy the barrier.

Sunny smiled darkly and kneeled, placing his hand on the ground. Summoning the Midnight Shard, he raised his other hand and brought the pommel of the sword down without any hesitation.

As the brittle bones of his ring finger shattered from the powerful strike, a wave of agony washed over his mind, obliterating the adamantite barrier.

'Now we get the hell out of here!'

Chapter 90: Nightfall | Shadow Slave

Nephis stared at Sunny, shocked by his sudden act of self-mutilation. Hissing through gritted teeth, he dismissed the Midnight Shard and slowly rose back to his feet.

"Ah! Crap! That really hurts!"

His poor finger was red and swollen, pulsating with sharp pain. It was unmistakably broken. Sunny was so full of self-pity that he wanted to cry.

'Why am I so unlucky? First that nightmare in the nest, now this. How come no one else is suffering, just me...'

He conveniently decided to forget that Changing Star had been literally torturing herself for weeks and that due to her blindness Cassie was always covered in bruises.

Hearing his pained voice, the blind girl turned her head and asked:

"...Sunny? What happened?"

He grimaced and tried to smile.

"Ah, it's... nothing serious, really. I just, sort of... smashed my hand a bit."

Nephis opened her mouth to say something, but he hurriedly interrupted whatever she wanted to say.

"Anyway, Neph. Can you help me drag this gruesome masterpiece of yours to the edge of the island?"

At this point, one wrong question could make things very complicated. He didn't want to reveal the true purpose of his actions until the last moment. That way, he would have more leeway in how to deal with problems... should any arise.

Changing Star hesitated. A few seconds later, she shrugged, looking at him with a concerned frown.

"Are you sure you're okay, Sunny?"

He forced a smile.

"I will be if you help me."

Giving up, she shook her head and walked over to the front of the boat. Sunny turned to Cassie.

"We're off, Cas. Wait here for a bit, alright? I'll come get you soon."

She lingered, as though not quite understanding his words, then answered with an uncertain expression.

"Uh... okay."

Sunny raised his healthy hand to grip her shoulder, then hesitated and turned away with a dark look in his eyes. Enduring the pain, he walked toward the boat.

'Hold on a little more, Cassie. It will be over soon, I promise...'

The night was already approaching.

Sunny and Nephis dragged the boat across the island, pulling it as oxen yoked to a wagon. The ashen sand was not the most difficult of terrains, but the spikes on the strange vessel's hull were making the task harder. Thankfully, the boat was lighter than it looked.

Sunny knew that the alloy of the demon's carapace was extremely light from his experience with the Midnight Shard, which was forged from the same lustrous metal. If he were to believe the sword's description, this miraculous alloy came from a shard of a fallen star.

Whether this omen was good or bad, he didn't know.

Soon, they heard a thundering rumble in the distance. It came from the direction of the colossal crater.

The dark sea was awakening.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny grabbed onto the golden rope that was coiled around his chest and pulled harder.

'Come on! Faster!'

The sun was just about to touch the horizon when they finally reached the edge of the island. Falling to his knees, Sunny released the rope and gasped for air, his chest rising and falling frantically. A wave of overwhelming exhaustion was drowning his senses, making it hard to stay awake.

'Not yet... you can't let go yet...'

Nephis was silent, looking at him with a frown. For once, Sunny felt glad that she was weirdly taciturn by nature.

Gathering his strength, he stood up and glanced at the darkening sky. Time was running out.

Turning to Neph, he strained his parched throat and said in a raspy voice:

"I'll explain everything once Cassie is here. Don't go anywhere until I bring her, alright? Please."

Changing Star stared at him for a few seconds, then shrugged with indifference and didn't say anything.

'I'll take it as a yes.'

What else could he do?

Cursing under his breath, Sunny turned around and hurried away. He had one last task to accomplish before returning for Cassie.

Some time later, he came back to the spot where he had left Cassie. The blind girl was still there, sitting some distance away from the Carapace Demon's carcass and idly staring into the ground.

Hearing the sound of his approaching footsteps, she smiled weakly.

"Sunny?"

He walked over, tired to the bone, and said while trying to keep his tone casual:

"Yeah. It's me."

Cassie got distracted for a moment, then asked:

"Do you have a fruit? I'm hungry."

He flinched, then shook his head.

"No. Listen, we need to..."

"...I'm hungry. Do you have a fruit?"

Sunny stopped, looking at the blind girl with a forlorn expression. She sounded like a broken doll, repeating the same phrase over and over. Her condition wasn't good.

He licked his lips.

"Come with me, and your hunger will disappear."

This was the best misdirection he could come up with within the confines of his Flaw. However, this time, he failed to achieve the desired effect.

Cassie smiled and said:

"Really? You'll take me to the fruits?"

Due to his exhaustion and the debilitating effect of the enthrallment, Sunny got distracted for a moment and failed to control the Flaw. Without realizing it, he opened his mouth and said:

"No."

Cassie pouted and lowered her head:

"That's not nice, Sunny. Why did you lie to me?"

Still reeling from his mistake, Sunny missed the moment and made things even worse, turning a small oversight into a real problem:

"...Because I want to take you away from this cursed island."

As soon as the words left his mouth, Sunny froze and opened his eyes wide, refusing to believe that he had just messed up that bad.

However, the damage was already done.

Cassie turned to him with a deep scowl.

"Take me... away? But I don't want to leave. Why would I leave the Soul Tree?"

Sunny silently cursed and shouted, abandoning any attempt to control himself:

"Because that thing is evil! It's pure goddamn nightmare! Come on, let's go..."

Grabbing her hand, he tried to pull the delicate girl away, but she resisted with surprising strength.

"Let go of me, you jerk!"

Cassie managed to rip her hand away from his grip and flinched back, looking at Sunny with anger.

"I said I don't want to go! You're acting strange, Sunny! Stop, please!"

Sunny froze, not knowing what to do.

"I just..."

"This island is our home! It's so nice here, with the three of us together! Why do you want to leave?!"

He lingered, struggling to do what he knew had to be done. Finally, Sunny gritted his teeth and said:

"Because it's five! Remember?!"

'I'm sorry, Cassie...'

Then, he lunged forward and violently grabbed the blind girl, easily suppressing her resistance.

"What are you doing?! Stop! Help! Help! Neph!"

Throwing her over his shoulder, Sunny turned around and ran toward the edge of the island. Cassie resisted desperately, using her small fists to pummel his back with a rain of punches.

Despite the fact that she had never taken part in battles against the Nightmare Creatures of the Forgotten Shore, she still was considerably stronger than a normal person. All those soul shards Changing Star had shared with her gave Cassie enough strength to make Sunny feel every strike.

It wasn't enough to seriously injure him, but more than enough to hurt like hell.

'I'm sorry, I'm really sorry, Cassie...'

Deeply disturbed, Sunny tried to block out Cassie's desperate screams and rushed to the boat. His forehead was covered in cold sweat.

As the last glimmers of light were disappearing from the sky, he finally returned to the edge of the island. The ghastly boat was silently standing on the sand, just a few meters away from the restless black water. Changing Star was resting just in front of it, raising her head to look at the source of the commotion.

"Neph! Help! Sunny had gone crazy!"

Nephis slowly rose to her feet, her indifferent expression radiating coldness. She slightly outstretched one hand.

'Crap.'

"Wait! It's not..."

Before he could finish the sentence, the silver sword appeared out of thin air, aimed at the ground... for now.

"Explain yourself."

Changing Star's voice was even and calm, but Sunny could feel the hidden threat in it. Suddenly, he saw her in a new light... or, rather, in an old one.

As a potential enemy.

The idea of facing off against Nephis sent chills running down his spine. He had almost forgotten the feeling he got back in the Academy, watching her wipe the floor with most of the Sleepers in their batch.

He had forgotten that she, too, was a monster.

Chapter 91: Escape | Shadow Slave

Licking his lips, Sunny cautiously said:

"It's not... not as you think, Neph. We've been caught in a trap by the Soul Tree. It's not benevolent... it's not protecting us. In fact, it's doing the opposite. If we don't leave this island, we'll become its slaves, forever. Or until it finds someone stronger and devours us!"

She tilted her head and looked at him with an unreadable expression.

"Come on, Nephis! Remember! We've talked about this already! This whole thing was your idea to begin with!"

For a moment, he thought that his words had awoken the stolen memories in her mind. But her response shattered those hopes into pieces.

"Leave... the great tree? You have really lost your mind."

'Curses!'

Changing Star raised her sword and said in a tone that made Sunny tremble.

"Let Cassie go. Now."

He hesitated, thinking about the best course of action. Then, he carefully placed the blind girl on the ground.

"Alright. I did. See? Now, listen to me. I have something very important to tell you..."

Before he was done speaking, Nephis disappeared from his view. Realizing that he was about to be attacked, Sunny prepared to defend himself...

However, a moment later, he was already lying on the ground, the tip of the silver sword pressed against his throat. Changing Star was standing above him, pale lights burning in her eyes.

'Well that was... embarrassing.'

All his training, all the experience he had won in countless bloody battles, all the power he had gained... Sunny had really thought that he stood a decent chance of standing his ground in a fight against Nephis, maybe even reaching a tie. But in the end, he had only lasted a second.

One would be tempted to call this shameful display a premature capitulation.

'Nice one, idiot! Now stop fooling around and focus!'

Feeling the cold steel touching his skin, Sunny tried to move as little as possible. He was pretty sure that Changing Star wouldn't just kill him in cold blood, but it was still better to not give her any reasons to do something drastic.

After all, Neph's mind was not all there.

Looking up at her cold, indifferent face, Sunny strained his vocal cords and shouted in exasperation:

"Aster, Song, Vale!"

Nephis's hand trembled, making a drop of blood roll down his neck. Her eyes opened wide, full of surprise and shock. Then, a dark expression appeared on her face.

Pressing slightly on the sword, she took a step forward and pierced him with a burning gaze. When she spoke, her voice was trembling with suppressed emotions:

"How... how do you know these names? Who are you?"

Sunny blinked, equally as surprised by her reaction. He had thought that these weird words were just a part of some code to jog her memory awake. But, as it turned out, they were not...

'Aster, Song, Vale... what the hell does it mean? What can make Nephis lose her cool? It has to be something important...'

Trying to stay as still as possible, he cautiously glanced at the blade of the sword and honestly answered:

"I didn't even know that these were names. It's just what you told me to tell you in case you forget what had to be done. You said if I tell you this, you'll listen to me."

Nephis stared at him, a shadow of doubt appearing on her face for a split second. It was gone almost instantly, replaced by grim determination. Gritting her teeth, she snarled:

"Which Domain do you belong to?!"

Sunny had no clue what she wanted him to say. So, he just asked:

"What's a domain?"

She grinned, a maniacal glimmer appearing in her eyes. This was very unlike calm, composed Nephis. If Sunny didn't know better, he would think that a completely different person was standing in front of him.

A person that was much more unpredictable and dangerous.

Meanwhile, Neph said:

"Don't pretend to... to..."

Suddenly, she stumbled, then frowned. It seemed as though Sunny's question touched something in Changing Star's mind, causing a chain reaction. A few seconds passed, each turning her frown deeper.

Slowly, the familiar poised calmness returned to her eyes. It didn't seem as though she had remembered everything, but, just as Nephis had promised, it seemed enough to make her listen to what Sunny had to say.

He understood it from the fact that she had finally removed the tip of the sword from this throat. She even helped him stand up.

Looking at Sunny with a strange expression, she then said:

"I really told you those words?"

Rubbing his slightly cut neck, he simply nodded. Blood Weave was already busy repairing the damage to his skin.

Nephis looked down, then closed her eyes for a few moments. When she opened them again, they were full of resolve.

"What do I need to do?"

Sunny really wanted to ask her about the meaning of the three mysterious names, but decided against it. They had to hurry.

"Ask Cassie to summon her staff. Then get her into the boat."

Dismissing her sword, Changing Star glanced at him for the last time and walked toward her friend.

Somehow, Nephis had managed to talk Cassie into following her and boarding the ghastly vessel. She probably had to lie about a lot of things, but Sunny didn't want to ask, afraid that his Flaw would ruin everything.

Once the girls were inside the boat, he wrapped his tired body into the shadow and put his hands on the metal hull. Every part of his body seemed to hurt in its own unique way.

His mind was utterly exhausted.

'Come on, Sunny. One last push.'

With a crooked smile, he strained his muscles and pushed the boat toward black water.

As the last light of dusk disappeared, submerging the world into absolute darkness, the boat built from the bones of a demon slipped from the ashen sand into the cold embrace of the dark sea.

Following Sunny's instructions, Cassie aimed her staff and activated its enchantment, causing a strong gale to fill their modest sail.

At first, the boat moved slowly, the mast creaking under pressure. But Changing Star's craftsmanship was meticulous and reliable. The demon's spine held, and little by little, the small vessel began to gain speed.

Sunny sat at the stern, controlling the steering oar. In front of them, an endless expanse of black water stretched to the horizon, hiding indescribable horrors in its depths.

Behind them, the terrifying Soul Devouring Tree was slowly growing smaller.

Sunny stared at it, feeling a deep sense of regret grip his heart. He wished that he was powerful enough to destroy it. Leaving just like that, without exacting revenge on the ancient monster, filled him with anger.

Well... at least he left it a present.

Back at the Ashen Barrow, a candle was burning in a small alcove of stones that protected its flame from wind. Near the candle, a tall pile of dry, fallen leaves was towering over the alcove.

It had taken Sunny a long time to gather that pile. He had scoured most of the island, hoping to make it as tall as possible. He had also mixed dry seaweed and the remaining fat of the Carapace Demon into the leaves.

Some time later, the small candle was nearing the end of its life. Most of the wax had already melted, turning it even smaller. Just as the flame was about to go out, it ignited the leaves. After a few seconds, a massive, searing bonfire ignited in the middle of the island, illuminating the scarlet leaves of the evil tree. Almost instantly, the black waters surrounding the island surged with movement.

Sunny was already too far away to see any of it.

He didn't know if the creatures of the dark sea would be able to obliterate the Soul Devourer. He strongly doubted that the ancient fiend was that easy to destroy. However, with the Carapace Demon dead and the three humans meant to replace him gone, there was no one on the island to protect the gluttonous tree. Perhaps it would be seriously harmed, at least.

For now, it was the best he could do.

Looking back in the direction of the Ashen Barrow, Sunny gritted his teeth and thought:

'One day, I will become powerful enough to destroy that tree, these monsters, and anyone else who would dare to stand in my way. One day, I will become powerful enough to never be afraid again, of anyone or anything. Instead, all of them will fear me!'

He didn't notice that, just as he was thinking these words, Cassie suddenly raised her head and turned in his direction.

On her face, a dark expression appeared, soon erased by uncertainty and doubt.

Chapter 92: Journey Into The Night

In the absolute darkness, a small vessel was gliding on the black surface of a restless sea. Its mast, made of a demon's spine, was straining under the assault of the winds. In the eerie silence of this vast and lightless void, the swift boat cut through the waves like a blade.

No sounds could be heard except for the creaking of bones and the crashing of water against its polished metal hull.

Sunny sat at the oar, steering the carapace vessel. He was guiding them west. With no moon or stars to show them the path, it was hard to keep the boat on course. But there was a mark left in his mind by the cold and menacing shadow of the Crimson Spire — using it as a compass, he was able to navigate the treacherous waters without losing his way.

Black skies above, dark sea beneath. With nothing but a thin layer of steel separating them from the tenebrous abyss, they sailed through the night.

Below them, countless horrors were hiding in the cursed depths. Several times, Sunny felt gargantuan shadows moving close to the small boat, attracted by the sound of its passing. Powerless to do anything, he had no choice but to tremble in silence, praying that the terrible creatures would turn away.

So far, luck was on their side. Perhaps they were too small and feeble to satiate the hunger of these ancient leviathans...

A few hours after the start of the voyage, Sunny felt that the constant pull on his mind had begun to wane. His thoughts were slowly becoming clearer, the haze of forgetfulness weakening with each minute. Soon, a ghostly sound of shattering glass resounded in his head. Instantly, the last remnants of the fog that was clouding his consciousness disappeared.

He was free from the enthrallment of the Soul Devourer.

Relieved, Sunny couldn't help but smile. However, his smile was weak and hesitant.

With the effects of the mind hex gone, his usual sharpness had returned. It felt as though an invisible weight had been lifted, allowing his thoughts to finally flow unobstructed once again. Everything became clearer, as though the whole world suddenly came into focus.

It was a wonderful feeling. But with it came a better understanding of how terrifying and precarious their current situation was.

They were quite literally balancing on the edge of a hungry abyss, their lives relying on nothing but capricious fortune. The decision to venture into the dark expanse of the cursed sea on a makeshift boat was pure insanity.

But then again, there was nothing sane about the Forgotten Shore to begin with. In this desolate hell, the craziest choice was sometimes the best one you had.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny held the oar and stared into the darkness.

A few minutes later, Cassie suddenly shifted, making the boat gently sway. She handed the magical staff to Nephis and cautiously moved closer to Sunny, feeling her way through the darkness with her hands.

Before Sunny could guess what was it that she wanted from him, he was suddenly caught in a tight embrace. The blind girl hid her face in his chest, hot tears streaming down her face.

Sunny froze, stunned and having no idea what to do. He could feel Cassie's body pressed against him and shaking from crying, her hands tightly wrapped around his neck. While he was trying to comprehend the situation, she quietly whispered:

"Thank you... thank you..."

Feeling extremely awkward, Sunny pretended to clear his throat.

"Uh... no need to thank me. If it wasn't for your warning, we would still be stuck on that island. So, we're even."

Then, he raised his hand and awkwardly patted her on the back.

Both of them were careful to keep their voices as quiet as possible, afraid that they will attract something from the black depths.

Cassie silently cried for several minutes, then finally let go of him. Wiping her face, she pulled her body away and whispered:

"I'm sorry."

Her voice sounded a bit strange. Confused, Sunny raised his eyebrows.

'What is she apologizing for?'

"Uh, I'm sorry too. For, you know, grabbing you back then."

She smiled and, wiping the last tear from her face, turned away to move back to the middle of the boat.

Sunny was left alone once again.

With nothing to do except for holding the steering oar, he let his thoughts wander. With his mind clear again, many things were worth revisiting. He had to distract himself from the eerie pressure of the endless dark emptiness somehow, anyway.

Despite the fact that their experience with the Soul Devourer was nothing short of harrowing, Sunny had somehow managed to end up considerably better off on the other end of it.

His haul this time was truly unbelievable. He had received an amazing new weapon, no less than a hundred shadow fragments, and two new Attributes.

Spark of Divinity was a real improvement over its previous version. The ability to perceive the inner structure of Memories alone opened a whole new horizon of possibilities. However, he was more interested in the

mysterious Blood Weave. Somehow, Sunny felt that he had severely underestimated the uniqueness and importance of that Attribute.

Its origins, too, were covered in a veil of secrets. Who was that Weaver whose ichor he had consumed? Who were the Unknown that even the Spell was reluctant to mention? What was their connection to the gods? Why were the type and rank of the initial Memory he had received from the Vile Thieving Bird's Spawn left empty?

How was it even possible for a Memory to give an Awakened new Attributes?

That last question guided him to think of something else.

Glancing up, he stared at Nephis and tried to recollect their conversation.

Looking back, she had revealed a lot of things that he had failed to notice in the moment.

First of all, Sunny now knew that Cassie's enchanted armor, which had been given to her by Changing Star, was an awakened Memory of the sixth tier. That meant that it came from an Awakened Terror, a Nightmare Creature one class above Mountain King that he himself had killed in his First Nightmare.

The secret of how Changing Star had managed to earn her True Name was now one step closer to being revealed.

Chapter 93: Black Water | Shadow Slave

Apparently, as far as accomplishing the impossible went, Nephis had outdone even Sunny. An Aspirant triumphing over an awakened tyrant was already unbelievable enough. But killing an Awakened Terror gave the word "unbelievable" a whole new meaning.

'No wonder her Aspect Ability is so versatile.'

Now, he was almost sure that Changing Star's Aspect was of the Divine Rank, just like his. That would explain why she was able to both heal and destroy with her strange and formidable powers, a combination as rare as his own Shadow Control.

'What's the probability of two Sleepers with Divine Aspects ending up so close to each other in the Dream Realm?'

Close to zero. It seemed like the unpredictable [Fated] Attribute had twisted the strings of fate once again.

Sunny felt shivers running down his spine.

His innate Attribute was capable of bringing both terrible curses and incredible blessings. At first glance, their meeting with Nephis seemed like the latter. But, if it was truly the result of [Fated] manipulating destiny, it could turn out to be the worst of calamities in the end.

After all, one of the possible meanings of her True Name was Star of Ruin.

The fear he had felt in that short moment before crossing swords with Nephis was still fresh in Sunny's mind.

And there were other things that she had revealed, too...

She apparently knew something about the [Drop of Ichor], being that she had called it a "Lineage Memory" without batting an eye. That suggested that Nephis knew much more about the Spell than Sunny and the rest of the

public did. It seemed as though there were secrets in the upper echelons of Awakened that they didn't want anyone else to know.

The three mysterious names she had told him might have been another of these secrets. And that last word she used, asking which "domain" he belonged to. What were these domains?

So many questions...

Sunny spent many hours pondering them, as well as going over all the information about the Forgotten Shore he had gathered.

The carapace boat flew over the dark water, drawing closer and closer to the western horizon.

Soon, he felt that the night was already drawing its last breaths. The light of hope ignited in Sunny's heart.

However, this was when their luck had finally run out.

The disaster came unexpected, violently throwing them into a void of confusion. This time, Sunny had not felt anything approaching the boat. The danger simply appeared out of nowhere, leaving him no time to react.

One second, the black waters were calm and clear. The next, they were boiling with movement, grotesque tentacles rising from them and wrapping themselves around the hull of the boat.

Sunny tried to jump to his feet, but at that moment, the whole vessel was violently jerked to the side. Falling, he heard the moans of metal being bent and torn apart. Then, salty water filled his mouth.

Rising, he caught a glimpse of Nephis standing at the bow of the boat, her silver sword lashing out at the approaching tentacle. However, blinded by darkness, she failed to notice a different threat. Another tentacle twisted and coiled around her body...

Then, without even a scream, she was gone, dragged into the dark depths, with no hope to return. All that remained was a long blade stuck helplessly in the bulbous flesh of the massive tentacle.

Sunny's eyes widened in disbelief.

'No, no, no... this can't be happening...'

The hull of the carapace vessel was then crushed and torn into pieces, throwing him into the cold, black water.

For a moment, Sunny was stunned by the coldness. Then, wrapping the shadow around his body, he swam up, trying to reach the surface. Soon, he succeeded and spun, trying to see something... anything... to give him hope.

But there was nothing around, only undulating waves and twisting tentacles.

Except for...

Far in the distance, Sunny noticed an unclear shape rising above the water. He strained his eyes, trying to discern its nature. Then, his heart skipped a beat.

A few hundred meters away, a giant stone hand towered above the surface of the sea, its palm opened as though trying to embrace the sky. It was slender and delicate, carved by the unknown sculptor with almost inhuman skill. If Sunny didn't know better, he would have thought that the hand belonged to a living, breathing being.

But all of this didn't matter right now. All that mattered was that he had a chance to survive.

Straining every muscle in his body, Sunny dodged a twisting tentacle and swam toward the hand, moving as fast as he could.

But then, he suddenly stopped. And looked back.

Misshapen pieces of metal and bone — all that remained of their boat — were floating on the surface of the dark sea. He had seen Neph being pulled under the water by the tentacles of the unknown creature, but Cassie, clad in her enchanted attention-repelling tunic, had a chance to escape.

He couldn't just leave without at least trying to find her.

'...Or can I?'

A dark thought appeared in Sunny's mind. After all, his own survival was the only thing that really mattered. Everything else was just a distraction...

'Why don't you think about yourself for a second? Are you really going to risk your precious life on the off chance that this helpless girl is still alive?'

He hesitated.

'Admit it, she is nothing but a burden. You always knew that one day she was going to drag you down...'

Yes, he did. But...

'But what? You're going to die, fool! Turn around and flee, now!'

Why was he even hesitating? This was his chance to escape! His only chance, perhaps! He had to survive!

Feeling an almost unbearable feeling of regret filling his chest, Sunny slowly inhaled.

Then, he gritted his teeth and dove down, heading back to the spot where their boat had been destroyed.

'What are you doing?! Have you lost your mind?!'

He couldn't see in the black water, but his Shadow Sense was still somewhat effective. He had a chance to feel Cassie's presence, at least if she wasn't already dead and dragged to the bottom of this cursed abyss.

'You fool! How is she worth it?! Why are you doing this?!'

Grimacing, he forced his annoying inner voice to shut up. In his mind, the answer was clear:

'Because I want to!'

Chapter 94: Battle In The Depths

Because he wanted to.

For once, Sunny's heart wasn't full of fear and despair. Instead, it was filled with defiant indignation. He was tired of bending under the pressure of the world, furtively clutching to the tiniest glimmers of hope, always afraid, always willing to do anything, abandon anything, just to survive for another day. It wasn't enough anymore.

He wanted to make the world bend to his wishes instead.

He wanted to live like a human being instead of an animal.

In these past months, Sunny had changed without even noticing. Somehow, he had grown unsatisfied with his previous way of life, one where his sole goal of survival at all cost overshadowed everything else. Whether he lives or dies had always been the only thing that mattered. But now, how he lived mattered more.

What was the point of having no master if he lived like a slave?

Gritting his teeth, Sunny dove into the dark abyss.

The cold water embraced him like a burial shroud. He couldn't see in this cursed blackness, relying only on his shadow sense for guidance. Salt sipped into the bite marks on his hands and the cut on his neck, making them burn. Not paying the agony any attention, Sunny used his considerable strength to propel himself deeper and deeper into the darkness.

He could feel the giant tentacles moving in the water around him, pulling the pieces of the carapace boat into the gargantuan maw that was hiding somewhere far below. Once or twice, he had to desperately twist his body to avoid being touched by one of them.

But still, no sign of Cassie. His lungs were starting to burn.

Sunny dove deeper.

At this depth, the water pressure was starting to affect his movements, making each stroke feel heavier. Even with his body enhanced by the shadow, there was a limit to how much it could withstand. Sunny suspected that without the Blood Weave, he would have suffocated a long time ago.

What's worse, he felt as though he was getting closer and closer to the actual body of the unknown horror that had destroyed their vessel. He still couldn't sense its massive shape, but judging by the girth of the tentacles that surrounded him, the monster couldn't have been far.

And then, Sunny finally noticed something.

A short distance away from him, a small shadow was struggling against a much larger and ferocious one.

Cassie!

Gathering all his strength, Sunny swam toward the blind girl with as much speed as he could muster. As he drew near, he could discern the details of what was happening.

Cassie was being pulled down, a smaller tentacle coiled around her body. She was still struggling, trying to get free, but her movements were growing weaker with each second. She was suffocating.

Filled with fury, Sunny propelled himself forward and grabbed onto the tentacle, feeling slippery flesh throbbing in his grip.

If he had any choice, he would have avoided touching that thing at all costs. But fighting underwater was tricky... if he wanted to deliver any sort of a powerful blow, he had to find some form of support first.

Summoning the Midnight Shard, Sunny strained every muscle in his body and slashed across the tentacle, right below the point where it was coiled around Cassie's lower torso. He knew that he wouldn't be able to do any

serious harm with that strike, which was slowed down to a crawl by the burdensome resistance of the black water.

However, his amazing sword was still sharp enough to cut into the fleshy tentacle, causing a cloud of dark blood to gush out of the wound.

The tentacle furiously twitched and shot sideways, as though trying to shake the attacker off. Flying through the darkness, Sunny held on for dear life and moved his blade upward, slicing the spongy flesh apart.

He never hoped to chop the tentacle off with one strike. No amount of strength would have allowed that to happen. Luckily, swords were able to pierce, slash... and cut.

Pushing the blade, Sunny cut deep into the tentacle. When the tsuba was about to touch the wound, he changed his grip and pulled the tachi down. Monster's flesh spread apart under the razor-sharp blade, barely offering any resistance.

A torrent of blood surged out, and with the last push, the tentacle was completely severed.

Sunny was finally able to turn his attention to Cassie to see how she was doing.

What he sensed made him scowl. The blind girl was barely conscious.

He needed to get her to the surface as fast as possible.

Pushing away the twitching remains of the tentacle, Sunny dismissed his sword and grabbed Cassie across the torso, feeling how cold her skin was through the thin fabric of her tunic.

Weakly, she tried to resist, not realizing that it was him and not the monster. Pressing the blind girl to his chest, Sunny turned his head up and felt a wave of desperation crashing against the walls of his mind.

His lungs were in agony, no air whatsoever left in them. His body was slowly losing its strength, full of terrible pain and thirsting for a breath of

fresh air with maddening intensity. Even if he could see anything, at this point, his vision would have begun to darken.

And they were so, so far away from the surface.

What's worse, the horror of the depths was now alerted to his location. Countless tentacles were already moving, surrounding them in an impenetrable barrier of flesh. A second or two later, they would be crushed to death in the devastating embrace of the sea monster.

Sunny didn't know how to save them.

But he wasn't going to give up, no matter what.

Making an arduous stroke with his one free hand, he held tightly onto Cassie and swam up. The tentacles were approaching, blocking all paths of escape. Sunny gritted his teeth and...

In the next moment, the water around them suddenly turned pure white.

An incandescent radiance filled a vast expanse of the cursed sea, obliterating any sign of darkness. The explosion of light was so intense that it pierced through Sunny's eyelids and hurt his eyes.

It was as though a miniature sun had ignited somewhere far below them, turning the endless black abyss into a pristine white void. Tidal currents of radiant water surged tumultuously, throwing the world into disarray.

The gargantuan tentacles convulsed and writhed madly, as though in the throes of unbearable pain. The unbreakable barrier of flesh fell apart.

Sunny wasn't about to let this chance go.

Straining his suffocating body, he swam to the surface, dodging the writhing tentacles. With the furious white sun burning in the depths below, he could see their shapes clearly. Moving faster and faster, he propelled himself up with everything he had left.

Sunny knew that surfacing that fast was dangerous, but there was no other choice. Both Cassie and himself did not have a lot of life left in them.

They needed air.

Although it seemed like an eternity, the white radiance began to dim just a few moments later. But it didn't matter. Sunny was already past the barrier of tentacles, swimming up with desperate speed.

He was afraid that they wouldn't make it. His consciousness was already beginning to wane, slowly slipping into the cold clutches of empty nothingness. Even knowing that there was nothing but water around, he was still overwhelmed by the suicidal desire to open his mouth and inhale as deeply as he could. His muscles were spasming, devoid of oxygen for too long.

...And then, finally, Sunny's head broke the surface. Blinded by pain, he drew in a gasping breath and coughed uncontrollably.

Held tightly in his arms, Cassie was doing the same. Her chest was ruggedly moving up and down, sucking in the sweet ambrosia of air. Sunny never knew how precious it was before, not even while being slowly poisoned by the harmful, polluted air of the outskirts.

They made it.

Trying to compose himself, Sunny looked around. The last remnants of the white radiance were long gone, erased as if they had never existed. The world was once again consumed by absolute darkness.

However, far away in the east, the first light of dawn was about to shine from beyond the horizon.

Catching the glimpse of the giant stone hand, Sunny gripped Cassie's shoulders and swam in that direction.

Chapter 95: Starlight | Shadow Slave

Sunny felt that he was at the end of his rope. He had put himself through too much abuse during these last few days. Now, it was hard to even remember when was the last time he had slept.

A day before climbing the Soul Devouring Tree in search of a special fruit, perhaps.

Since then, he had lived through the harrowing torture of the Blood Weave transformation, spent countless hours on the verge of mental collapse to resist the effects of the enthrallment, mangled his hands to stay lucid, guided the boat through the terrors of the dark sea in absolute darkness, saw it being destroyed by the horrid dweller of the deep, and gave battle to that monster in the cold black depths, almost drowning as the result.

His body and mind were on the brink of shutting off.

Despite that, Sunny stubbornly continued to swim, bringing himself and Cassie closer and closer to the giant stone hand that was rising from the water, as though trying to embrace the skies.

The dark sea was surging around him, still reeling from the effects of the light explosion that had rocked it sometime earlier. Tall waves were threatening to drown the two Sleepers, throwing them around like toys. Struggling against them was a hard task.

And still, he persisted.

The dawn was drawing close, but for now, there was still nothing but cold, darkness and danger all around them. Any second, something could rise from the depths of the abyss and put an end to their desperate attempt to save themselves.

At least the tentacles were gone, perhaps scared away by the pain of being exposed to the searing light.

By some miracle, Sunny eventually managed to reach the stone hand.

Hoisting Cassie up, he helped her climb on the dark rocks and followed closely behind. Soon, they reached the open palm of the hand and crawled to its center, then fell down, utterly spent and exhausted.

For a long time, neither of them was able to talk. All Sunny could do was lay motionless, draw in raspy breaths, and try to stay awake.

His mind was empty of thoughts. That was fine, because he didn't want to think. If he did, he would be forced to remember... remember what had happened to...

'Shut up!'

What was the point of remembering? He couldn't change anything.

The sound of the black water crashing against the base of the giant hand reminded him that the night was still not over.

Opening his eyes, Sunny tried to understand their current circumstances.

Their shelter was slightly raised above the waves, the base of the giant thumb almost touching the surface of the dark sea. The palm was not very spacious, roughly half the size of the circular platform that had saved his life on his first day on the Forgotten Shore. It was angled upward, creating a slight slope.

The fingers were higher above waves and wide enough to accommodate a person, but they were bent upward toward the sky, making them less suitable to serve as a refuge.

'We need to get further away from the water.'

With that thought, Sunny tiredly stood up and bent down to touch Cassie's shoulder.

"Cassie. Stand up. We have to move higher."

His voice sounded hollow and brittle.

The blind girl flinched and raised her head, her skin deathly pale.

"...Sunny?"

He nodded.

"Yeah. It's me."

She was still in shock. Sunny could see that Cassie's mind was not all there yet, so he gently pulled her to her feet.

"Come on, let's go. It's just a few meters."

She lingered.

"What happened? I heard a... a sound... and then something was pulling me down..."

He gritted his teeth and tried to keep his tone even.

"We were attacked by a sea monster. The boat was destroyed. I dove down and managed to find you, then swam to this pile of stones. It's not very high above the water, so..."

Cassie wavered.

"Where's... where's..."

Sunny hurried to interrupt her, unwilling to answer the next question.

"Come, follow me. We can rest when we're higher."

Gently guiding the blind girl, Sunny climbed to the base of the giant hand's index finger, which was the highest point they could reach without climbing the fingers themselves. Sitting down on the cold stone, he rested his back against the giant phalanx and stared at the restless surface of the dark sea.

His eyes were cold and empty.

Cassie was silent by his side. Her pale face was contorted, as though she simultaneously wanted to ask the question and dreaded the answer.

Finally, gathering her courage, the blind girl whispered, her trembling voice barely audible:

"Sunny. Where is Neph?"

He stayed silent, not willing to speak the words out loud.

Stupidly, he felt that if he spoke them, they would become the truth. But if he didn't, there was still a possibility that they were a lie.

'I'm not answering.'

A few moments later, the familiar pressure appeared in his mind. The pressure grew and grew, making his head spin.

'I'm not!'

Then, the piercing pain came. Sunny stubbornly endured it. He lasted for much longer than he had ever done before, keeping his mouth shut until hot tears rolled from his eyes, his whole body shaking from the terrible suffering.

But eventually, he was still forced to say those bitter words.

"She's... she's g..."

Before he could finish, a subtle sound attracted his attention. It came from below, from the edges of the restless dark waves.

Sunny's heart skipped a beat.

Out there at the base of the giant thumb, where the cursed sea was almost touching its stone surface, a pale white hand appeared from the black water and grabbed onto the rocks.

Then, a tall figure slowly pulled itself onto the opened palm of the stone giantess.

His eyes widened.

Feeling that something was wrong, Cassie turned her head and asked:

"Sunny? What is it?"

He trembled and whispered, gripped with sorrow.

"It's Nephis."

An uncertain smile appeared on the blind girl's face.

"Neph?! She is alright?!"

Sunny found himself unable to answer.

No, Nephis was not alright.

In fact, he didn't know how she was even alive.

The Starlight Legion Armor was shattered and torn, revealing the mutilated flesh beneath. There was a horrifying gaping wound on Changing Star's torso, looking as though almost half of her right side was missing. Sunny could see the sharp shards of broken ribs, the rivers of blood streaming down her legs, and the mangled mess of viscera spilling over the edges of the wound.

He wanted to close his eyes.

Another large chunk of flesh was missing from her thigh, exposing the shredded remnants of muscle and the white surface of the femur, cracked and barely holding together. Her right arm was severely damaged, too. In fact, it was almost torn off, hanging only by a narrow strip of skin and a few tendons, like that of a mistreated, broken marionette

Even her face was not spared. One of Neph's eyes was gone, its socket crushed and shattered, the skin of her cheek was shaved off as though by sandpaper, leaving behind a mangled mess of bleeding flesh and broken teeth.

The sight of her was harrowing and heartbreaking.

It was apparent that Changing Star was about to die.

"Sunny? Why are you not answering?"

He glanced at Cassie and bit his lip, trying once again to suppress the answer that was fighting its way out. Something sharp and hot was stabbing at his heart, making his vision blurry.

Meanwhile, Nephis staggered and blindly stepped forward. Her legs buckled, and she heavily fell to her knees, splattering blood all over the cold surface of the stone. A terrible moan escaped from her lips as her cracked femur finally shattered, bone piercing through muscle and skin.

Sunny felt as though he was thrown into his worst nightmare. He wanted to scream, but his voice was gone. A deep, almost physical pain was tearing him from inside.

He didn't want to be here. He didn't want to see this.

And yet, he couldn't look away.

...That's why he noticed instantly when two white flames ignited in Neph's eyes. The radiance grew brighter and brighter, spilling from her eyes, her mouth, the gaping wounds in her body. It was as though there was a flaming star burning in the place where her heart should have been, as though she was nothing but white flame hidden behind a thin layer of human skin.

The incandescent radiance filled Changing Star's blood, turning it into streams of liquid white fire.

As Sunny watched, frozen in place with his eyes opened wide, that fire began to melt and reshape her flesh. Slowly, her muscles repaired herself,

her organs returned to their places, her bones reassembled themselves from the shards.

Where there was nothing to replace a missing part, the fire took its shape and solidified.

With a terrible scream, Nephis grasped her almost severed arm and tore it away, then pressed it to the stump that was bleeding with white flame. Soon, the mangled halves melted together, becoming whole again.

Shocked, he saw every terrible wound on her body heal, washed in the purifying fire.

Soon, there was nothing but pristine white skin showing through the wide gaps in the shattered armor.

Nephis raised her head, looking at them but not seeing anything. There was no recognition in her gaze, all understanding destroyed by the cruel crucible of the sacred fire.

Then the last daughter of the Immortal Flame clan closed her eyes and fell to the ground, losing consciousness.

...Finally, the first rays of sunshine appeared from beyond the eastern horizon.

The dawn was coming.

In the end, Nephis had remained unconscious for an entire two days.

On the third day, she finally opened her eyes and slowly rose, looking around with subtle confusion.

Her face, as usual, was calm and indifferent.

However, she did flinch a little when her gaze fell on Sunny, who was sitting at the top of the giant hand's index finger and grinning from ear to

ear at her.

Frowning, Changing Star looked herself over, noticing the embarrassing gaps in her armor, and said:

"Why are you smiling?"

Sunny gave her a mischievous wink and shrugged.

"Look behind you."

Lingering for a few seconds, Neph sighed and turned around, wondering what is it that he wanted her to see.

Behind her, a dark expanse of land was rising above the slope of the colossal crater.

And on it, a tall city wall built of grey polished stone was towering over the giant chasm of the abyss. It looked ancient but still impenetrable, able to withstand the crushing pressure of the dark sea for a thousand more years,

They've made it.

That had found the human castle.

[End of volume one: Child of Shadows.]

Chapter 96: Exile | Shadow Slave

"Wake up, Sunless! Your nightmare is..."

"Shut the hell up!"

Trying to remain in the blissful embrace of sleep, Sunny hissed through his teeth and stubbornly closed his eyes tighter. He was warm and comfortable under the blanket, on his own bed, where all the problems of the world seemed less serious and dire.

For a moment, there was silence.

'That's better...'

"Wake up, Sunless! Your..."

'Goddammit!'

Thrusting one arm from under the blanket, Sunny summoned one of his Memories. Immediately, a triangular leaf-shaped throwing dagger appeared in his hand, only to be thrown blindly at the source of the irritating voice. Missing its mark, the kunai clinked against the stone wall and fell to the floor.

However, the voice did fall silent.

Sunny sighed. It was already too late. He was awake.

Far in the distance, the waves were starting to crash against the city wall. The night was coming, so it was time to get up.

Opening his eyes, Sunny sat up and looked around.

His room was beautiful and spacious. The stone walls were engraved with intricate patterns, creating an atmosphere of sanctity and elegance. The

furniture was made out of pale polished wood, with several mismatched pieces that Sunny had scavenged from different places himself.

The room had no windows, however, there were light wells cunningly hidden here and there. Sadly, the ingenious system of mirrors that was supposed to bathe the hidden chamber in sunlight was long destroyed, leaving only darkness inside.

Sunny didn't mind. In fact, this was one of the features of his secret lair that he enjoyed the most.

Darkness was his best friend.

Yawning, he stood up and rubbed his face to chase away the last remnants of sleep. His long, dirty hair was getting in the way, so he moved it back.

'Let's make some breakfast.'

But first things first...

Sunny moved his hand, pulling on the invisible string that connected his wrist to the ring-shaped pommel of the kunai. The throwing dagger jumped into the air and landed on his palm. This was a trick that had taken Sunny quite some time to master: in the beginning, he almost lost a couple of fingers while trying to learn how to control the flying blade.

Walking over to a wall empty of engravings, he used the kunai to scratch a small line into the stone. All around it, there were dozens and dozens of similar lines, grouped neatly into sets of five.

It had already been four months since Sunny came to this loathsome, godforsaken city.

Many things had happened during that time.

Cassie's vision turned out to be true. Far in the west, they indeed found a vast, ruined city surrounded by tall walls, with monsters wandering its

narrow streets. And in the center of the city, there was a hill with a magnificent castle standing on its top.

Miraculously, the castle was full of people. However, they weren't Awakened, as the three of them had hoped. Instead, they were, each and every one of them, mere Sleepers.

Because they were no Gateway in the castle.

Hundreds of humans — those who had managed to survive the lethal hellscape of the Forgotten Shore due to their strength or luck — were stuck there with no hope of ever returning to the real world. It was nothing but a graveyard of hope.

Remembering his first days in the castle, Sunny couldn't help but laugh out loud. Oh, what a fool he had been. So full of hope and newfound faith in humanity... where's that faith now, huh?

Laughing hysterically, he bent over and slapped his knees.

"Oh, that's funny! Good one, Sunny. What do you think about that, eh buddy?"

The shadow didn't respond, staring at him with reproach. Its silence only made Sunny laugh louder. He just couldn't stop.

To be honest, he had gone a little bit insane some time ago. Probably around his third week of living alone in the city. He was more or less alright after leaving the castle due to that unfortunate falling out with... well, it didn't matter.

The point was that on his third week, that damn bastard of a knight had almost disemboweled him, leaving Sunny no choice but to crawl away while using his own two hands to stop his intestines from falling out. After finding his way to a secluded ditch and lying there for a few days, too weak to move and simply waiting to die, with not a soul around to help him, Sunny wasn't quite the same.

'Good times...'

Anyway, he survived.

Dismissing the kunai, Sunny walked over to a table that he had scavenged from the ruins of a library and glanced at the grey rock that was lying in its center.

No matter how you looked at it, it was just an ordinary rock. However, as soon as Sunny's gaze fell on it, the rock spoke:

"Wake up, Sunless! Your nightmare is over!"

That rock was, in fact, one of his most valuable Memories. In all ways except for one, it was indeed just a rock... which was already useful enough. There were a lot of things that someone as devious as Sunny could accomplish with the help of a rock. However, this particular rock was also capable of parroting different sounds, which made it simply priceless.

Right now, it was parroting Sunny's own voice.

"Wake up..."

'You vile thing!'

Struggling with the irrational desire to turn the Parrot Rock into dust, Sunny dismissed it and removed a piece of cloth from the table. Beneath it, a few strips of monster meat lay on a silver platter.

He had hunted this monster himself, which was not an easy task in these parts. In fact, as far as Sunny knew, he was one of the very few people capable of hunting in the city alone. The reason for this was that most of the Nightmare Creatures populating it were of the Fallen rank, with only a handful of weaker ones hiding here and there.

No one was crazy enough to hunt the Fallen monsters. Instead, large hunting parties used experienced guides to avoid these powerful creatures while searching for easier prey.

But to Sunny, singling out stray Awakened monsters were comparatively easy. He hunted at night, using deep shadows to make himself nothing short of invisible. If he didn't want to fight a Fallen abomination, he didn't have to.

Most of the time...

In any case, he never went hungry.

Sunny grinned and said in a deeply satisfied tone:

"Ah, life is good..."

Chapter 97: Hunter's Dream | Shadow Slave

Life, indeed, was good. In fact, Sunny would even go so far as to say that, currently, it was wonderful.

One would expect that being stuck in a cursed city located in the middle of an actual hell, surrounded by nothing but ruins and horrifying monsters, was not really the best way to live your life. But to him, this was somewhat of a paradise.

To his surprise, Sunny had found out that this type of existence suited him pretty well. He had no obligations, no need to worry about the future and, most importantly, was not required to interact with other humans.

Humans always made things hard and complicated. He was sick of them.

Being on your own was much better. He didn't have to pretend to be someone else, force himself to behave differently from how he wanted to, and strain his mind trying to understand people's convoluted feelings.

For the first time in his life, Sunny could simply be himself.

Turns out, his true self was very easy to please. He had no shortage of interesting things to do, explore, and kill. His life was very entertaining and comfortable, all things considered.

It was at least way better than his pathetic existence in the outskirts, back in the real world.

The key to this harmonious feeling was very simple. It was to have no hope.

Sunny discovered that hope was the true enemy of peace. It was the most vile and poisonous thing in the universe. If there was even a glimmer of hope to return home, he would have been desperate, full of anxiety, and probably in the middle of some insane disaster right now.

Like he had always been before.

But without hope, things were simple and pleasant. He really couldn't wish for more.

"Keep telling yourself this crap. You might really believe it."

Sunny grinned.

"What is there to believe? It's the truth!"

The shadow silently shook its head, long accustomed to his crazy tirades. Lately, Sunny had been talking with himself a lot, having long arguments that sometimes descended into screaming matches. It was a good way to pass the time.

...A bit later, he emerged from his secret chamber. Sunny's lair was situated in the upper part of a ruined cathedral, the entrance hidden behind a tall statue of some unknown goddess. There was a small balcony that allowed him to observe the grand hall of the temple over the goddess's shoulder, concealed from sight by the strands of her stone hair.

The balcony was really high above the floor, making it impossible for any creature to climb on it by accident. Falling down would certainly kill a normal human.

Sunny had discovered the hidden room while spying on the bastard that had gutted him. He had entered the cathedral through the hole in its roof and landed on one of the wide support beams, then walked across and accidentally noticed the small balcony.

That's how he and the bastard had become neighbors. The bastard was, in fact, the guardian of this place. He patrolled the grand hall, killing anyone who dared to come inside. Sunny saw plenty of powerful Nightmare Creatures fall to his sword, cleaved apart without much effort.

Of course, the bastard was a Nightmare Creature of considerable power himself.

Sunny was pretty sure that he was at least a devil.

Sharing the cathedral with a devil was very convenient. Sunny could sleep easy knowing that no monster would be able to reach the inner sanctum alive. Of course, he had to be careful to never be seen by his murderous roommate.

On the upside, he could observe the devil as much as he wanted, waiting for a chance to exact his revenge. Sunny was hellbent on killing the damn knight, eventually. The bastard had to die.

But before that, Sunny had to become stronger. Much, much stronger.

Walking across the beams of the cathedral, he approached the hole in the roof and climbed through it.

Outside, the night was already reigning over the world.

It was time to hunt.

A skeletal, hunched figure was slowly walking along the narrow street of the cursed city. The creature had long arms that ended with vicious claws and a deformed head with a wide mouth full of razor-sharp fangs.

Even with its back bent, the monster was at least two meters tall. It was dressed in a torn shroud that was once white, but had long ago turned brown from the dried blood.

This was Sunny's prey.

The creature, which was called a Blood Fiend, was among the weakest dwellers of the cursed city. It was merely an awakened monster, barely intelligent and comparatively easy to kill.

Of course, nothing was really easy to kill here. After all, each and every human on the Forgotten Shore was just a dormant beast.

Despite the fact that they shared the same rank and class, Blood Fiends were less formidable than Carapace Centurions in terms of strength and

speed. However, that was only until they smelled blood, which sent them into a murderous frenzy. In that state, these fiends were a true menace.

'Pathetic,' Sunny thought, stalking the Nightmare Creature from the shadows.

He had killed a few of these monsters in the past and had a great time each time... well, except for this one encounter where he had accidentally scratched himself on a sharp stone. That was not fun at all.

'Time to die, you ugly freak!'

The Blood Fiend was just about to turn the corner when a sudden sound attracted his attention. With unnatural speed, the monster turned around and fell on all fours, his sensitive ears picking up the slightest rustle. Then, he took a few careful steps forward and stopped at a certain spot.

In front of the fiend, an ordinary-looking rock was lying on the ground.

A second later, the rock suddenly spoke:

"Behind you," it said politely.

The creature froze for a moment, then turned around with lightning-fast speed.

Something whistled in the air, and the upper part of the Blood Fiend's body separated from the lower. Still refusing to die, the monster reached out with its long arms.

"Too slow!"

Sunny slashed with the Midnight Shard, severing one of the arms at the elbow. Continuing the motion, he took a quick step forward and performed another strike, this time piercing the creature's skull. The tip of the tachi entered through one of its eyes and exited through the back of the head.

All of it took less than a second. By the time both parts of the monster fell to the ground, Sunny had already retrieved his sword.

Looking up with expectation, he smiled and waited.

"Come on, say it!"

As if answering his call, the Spell whispered:

[You have slain an awakened monster, Blood Fiend.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Sunny grinned.

"Ah, thank you kindly. You're so sweet."

The runes shimmered as they appeared in the air in front of him. Looking down, he read:

Shadow Fragments: [398/1000].

Just two fragments away from four hundred. These days, he was progressing at a very respectable speed. In the beginning, back when he had not known the city and the creatures that populated it, Sunny was lucky to get a few fragments in a week.

He had also been much more prone to ending up bloodied and one step away from death.

But now, things were slowly changing. He couldn't even remember the last time he felt compelled to say goodbye to life.

'Ah, you idiot. You just had to go and think that out loud, huh?'

Just as he finished that thought, a distant sound of footsteps reached his ears.

Chapter 98: Uninvited Guests | Shadow Slave

Sunny looked grimly at the corpse of the Blood Fiend, then in the direction of the approaching footsteps.

Who was crazy enough to remain in this cursed city during the night? Only a complete lunatic would do something that stupid. All the sane people were long gone from the streets, not to mention that very few were willing to enter the ruins to begin with.

A dark shadow flowed from the tip of the Midnight Shard's blade. Coalescing on the ground, it stared at him with sarcasm.

Sunny stared back.

"What?"

The shadow shook its head and didn't answer, forcing him to turn away with a confused shrug.

"Whatever. Ah, it seems we have guests. What to do, what to do? The place is a mess!"

Looking around, Sunny sighed, glanced at the corpse of the monster once again, and summoned the kunai. The smart thing to do was to run away. Who knew what exactly was producing those footsteps? Maybe it was a group of people, maybe it was a Nightmare Creature with a lot of feet. It was better not to find out.

Be he wasn't done with the hunt yet. He still had to get his trophies...

"Go take a look."

Sending the shadow away, Sunny kneeled and began to cut the tough flesh of the dead creature. Without the enhancing effect of the shadow, slicing the Blood Fiend apart was not as easy. However, he still managed to find the first soul shard rather quickly. One more to go...

Meanwhile, the shadow had discovered the uninvited visitors. Six humans were cautiously walking along the narrow path in the stone ruins, lighting their way with a ghostly blue lantern.

They were all rugged men, wearing mismatched suits of armor and armed to the teeth. Their eyes were cold and hard.

Sunny raised his eyebrows.

"My, oh my. They really are people. What is a bunch of Gunlaug's thugs doing outside the castle walls in the middle of the night?"

Gunlaug was the owner of the castle and the self-proclaimed king of this odious place. Every Sleeper on the Forgotten Shore was forced to either serve him or pay him tribute. Even still, the latter usually didn't live long.

Dismissing the Midnight Shard and the Parrot Rock, Sunny concentrated on searching for the second soul shard. He wanted to be gone from the street before these gentlemen arrived.

But the circle of blue light was approaching too fast...

Finally catching a glimpse of the glowing crystal, Sunny grabbed it and hurriedly hid it in his armor. Then he dropped the kunai on the ground and took several steps back.

But it was too late. They had already seen him.

"Be careful! There's a monster!"

As Sunny was backing away, several weapons were aimed in his direction. Feeling that things were about to get out of control, he cleared his throat and said in a trembling voice:

"Oh, oh! Please don't hurt me! I'm a human!"

Saying this, he mentally looked himself over.

With his ghostly pale skin and dirty hair, his ragged armor covered in layers of dried and fresh blood, Sunny was indeed easy to mistake for a Nightmare Creature. He wasn't really paying much attention to personal hygiene and appearances these days.

Hopefully, speaking in a human language would prove his identity. Raising his hands to show that he wasn't armed, Sunny took another step back.

The six Sleepers were really surprised to see another human this far away from the walls of the castle, especially at night. Using their momentary confusion, he cautiously moved even further away.

"Don't move!"

Finally able to comprehend the situation, one of the castle inhabitants hissed a threatening command. Sunny obediently froze, careful not to make any sudden movements.

The unexpected guests proceeded to come closer, glancing at the corpse of the Blood Fiend as they walked past it. One of them was taller and better equipped than the rest. Piercing Sunny with a menacing gaze, he approached him and stopped one or two steps away.

The man was older than Sunny by a few years. He was tall and muscular, with a patchy beard covering the lower part of his face and a mean look in his watery blue eyes. From his demeanor and Memories, it was easy to tell that the leader of the group had spent no less than three years on the Forgotten Shore. He had experience and time to grow stronger than most Sleepers here.

However, it was also apparent that he wasn't really high up in the ranks of Gunlaug's army. Otherwise, his equipment would have been much more impressive.

Still, the heavy battle-axe that was resting on the man's shoulder looked really sharp. It would take him only a second to bring that thing down on Sunny's head...

"Who are you?! What the hell are you doing here?!"

Sunny blinked a couple of times, then gulped and answered carefully:

"Uh... I'm Sunless. I live here."

The leader of the hunting party — if that what it was — narrowed his eyes.

"What... live here? Do you take me a fool, boy?! No one can survive in the city!"

The other Sleepers were of the same opinion — except for one, who looked at Sunny with doubt. Frowning, he took a step forward and said in an uncertain tone:

"Wait, chief. He might be telling truth. I heard that there's a crazy kid who lives in the ruins alone."

The taller man scowled.

"How is that possible?"

His subordinate glanced at Sunny and shrugged.

"From what I heard, his Aspect allows the boy to hide in the shadows really well. I guess he crawls around like a rat and picks up the leftovers after the monsters are done eating. I don't really know, but someone was talking about him back in the castle. I thought they were just telling tales."

Sunny frowned. Crazy, boy, rat... why did everyone feel compelled to call him names?

Meanwhile, the helpful Sleeper thought for a bit and added:

"I think he came into town with that bitch, Changing Star."

Sunny's frown turned into a scowl. Looking down, he whispered to his shadow:

"These guys are really very rude, don't you think?"

Of course, his whisper was easily heard by everyone around. The Sleepers stared at him in confusion.

Sunny tilted his head a little and opened his eyes wide, as if shocked by something.

"What? You think I should kill them all? I mean... isn't it a little bit over the top? I should give them a chance to apologize, at least."

The leader of the hunting party took a step forward and said in a low, growling voice:

"What are you mumbling about, rat?"

Sunny looked at him with scorn and dissatisfaction.

"Hey, I was talking to my buddy. Can you please not interrupt?"

A wide, dangerous smile appeared on the tall man's face. With a sigh, Sunny turned to him and said:

"Alright, if you insist. You guys have offended my dearest friend, Nephis of the Immortal Flame clan. She and I are very, very close. So I'll give you one chance to apologize for calling her a... well, you know. If you don't, say goodbye to your lives."

The older man stared at him for several seconds, then suddenly raised his head and laughed.

"Oh, that's a good one! Have you heard, guys? This tiny weasel will give us a chance. How generous! Should we be generous too, huh? What do you say? The boy is sick in the head, after all."

The other five Sleepers were not sharing his enthusiasm. One of them smiled darkly and said:

"No, chief. I think we should just kill him. Put the poor fool out of his misery, you know."

The Sleeper that had collaborated Sunny's story before, meanwhile, was frowning again.

"Wait, guys... he's one of Changing Star's people, remember? The original group, I mean. They had survived two entire months in the Labyrinth on their own. We shouldn't underestimate th..."

However, the leader interrupted him with a contemptuous scoff.

"I heard that Saint Nephis carried two useless sacks of shit on her back all the way to the castle. The bitch is fond of taking care of weaklings, right? That delicious little friend of hers is blind, for god's sake! I'm sure that this one is no better."

Then, he turned to Sunny and grinned.

"I tell you what, rat. Give us all your Memories, and we'll be generous enough to let you live. "

If an Awakened died, their Memories disappeared with them. The only way to get the Memories was to make the owner transfer them of their own free will. However, whether or not that will was affected by coercion or torture didn't really matter. At least not to people like these.

Sunny blinked.

"So you're not going to apologize?"

The tall man grinned.

"I think not."

Sunny sighed.

"Oh well. So you want my Memories, eh? I have a few. Let me think... uh... how about this one?"

Lowering one hand, he summoned the Parrot Rock. It immediately appeared on his palm, looking as boring and ordinary as always.

The leader of the hunting party frowned, not taking his eyes away from Sunny's face. Despite his crude exterior, he was paranoid and careful. Years of experience had taught him to never lower his guard.

A moment later, the rock spoke:

"Behind you!"

That was the most basic of tricks...

The tall man grinned, still looking Sunny in the eyes.

"Do you really think that I would fall for..."

However, before he was done talking, the blade of the kunai hit him from behind, penetrating the back of the man's skull and killing him on the spot.

Chapter 99: Pursuit | Shadow Slave

Sunny had dropped the throwing dagger near the monster's body in advance and then took all those steps back to make this exact situation possible. As soon as the Parrot Rock spoke, he pulled on the invisible string, sending the kunai flying back in his direction. The tall bastard didn't just happen to be in its path, either.

[You have slain...]

The leader of the hunting party really should have listened to that rock.

[... shadow grows stronger.]

Before the Sleepers even had time to react, Sunny was already moving. The shadow had been wrapped around his body a long time ago, making him that much faster. Summoning the Midnight Shard, he fluidly slashed at the nearest enemy, severing the man's arm at the elbow.

The blade struck right between the vambrace and the couter of his enchanted plate armor.

To Sunny, these people were slow and clumsy, their power level and technique severely lacking. He had already been more experienced than them after the harrowing journey through the crimson labyrinth, learning how to wield the sword in combat from Changing Star herself.

The three months he had spent hunting and surviving alone in the cursed city only made the gap that much wider. Despite looking like easy prey, Sunny was anything but.

However, he wasn't foolish enough to challenge all five of them. People might have been weaker than Nightmare Creatures, but what made them really dangerous was their unpredictability. Each Aspect was unique, arming humans with a formidable arsenal of inexplicable Abilities.

Facing something you couldn't understand was the surest way to end up dead.

With his advantage of surprise gone, Sunny decided that it was time to retreat.

Turning around, he jumped out of the circle of light and ran. It was really hard to pursue someone who could see in the dark on these narrow streets, so there was a real chance of escaping unscathed.

However, the kunai was still attached to Sunny's wrist. Sliding out of the dead leader's skull, it fell to the ground and clinked loudly against the stones, then jumped a few meters away and hit the pavement again, creating more noise.

"Get the bastard! He killed the chief!"

Following the sound of metal striking against stone, the Sleepers lunged forward, following in Sunny's footsteps.

'What a persistent bunch.'

Even the guy who had lost his arm was on his heels, either having a way to stop the bleeding or simply unwilling to let the attacker escape even if it cost him his own life.

This part of the city was Sunny's hunting ground. He knew every nook and cranny of these streets like his own five fingers. Honestly, he was unsure what these guys were even thinking. If it wasn't for him carefully choosing the path, they would have ended up disturbing some terrifying Fallen creature and becoming its dinner a long time ago.

Something wasn't quite right here. Gunlaug's people might have been thugs, but they were experienced and accomplished hunters. They feared the city and knew how to behave while outside the castle walls.

Otherwise, all of them would have been dead a long time ago.

Come to think of that, it was extremely rare to see them going anywhere near the city at night.

Were these fools even real hunters? If not, what were they up to?

Sunny briefly considered leaving one of them alive to interrogate later, but then decided against it. To be honest, he wasn't really curious. Human business had long ago lost its allure in his eyes.

He had much more interesting things to do.

Finally reaching his goal, Sunny lingered on the steps, pretending to be in a panic.

The five Sleepers were once again able to lay eyes on their victim. The scrawny kid was hesitating in front of the entrance to a large ruined building, fear clearly written on his dirty, pale face. It seemed as though he didn't know where to go, afraid to run into a dead end.

Noticing them, he flinched and dove into the building with desperation in his eyes.

"You have nowhere to run now, rat!" hissed the man who had lost his hand to Sunny's blade.

Full of killing intent, the Sleepers followed the crazy young man into the building.

...However, once they got inside, they saw no sign of the scared kid. The only thing they saw was a simple rock lying on the floor.

As the one-armed man belatedly realized that something was wrong, the rock said in an ominous tone:

"... say goodbye to your lives!"

A second later, a massive silhouette stepped out of the darkness.

The man's eyes widened as the figure of a regal knight clad in a menacing black armor reflected in them.

The creature was more than two meters tall, his gothic armor forged from a lusterless, anthracite steel. Every part of the armor was decorated with intricate engravings that told a tale so horrifying that anyone would go insane from looking at them for too long.

The helmet of the Black Knight was crowned with curved horns that might have been wings once. In the narrow fissure of his visor, two ghastly red flames were burning with indescribable menace.

Before the Sleeper had time to react, a heavy black blade fell from above, effortlessly severing his body from head to groin, cutting through flesh, bone and armor with similar ease.

A torrent of blood surged to the floor.

...Climbing onto one of the supporting beams of the ruined cathedral, Sunny sat down and looked at the slaughter that was happening below.

'Huh. The bastard is in a really bad mood today. Well, have fun!'

Some time later, as the echoes of screams began to fade away, he sighed and counted the corpses lying on the distant floor.

It was hard to count, because most of them were in pieces.

Making sure that not one of the pursuers got away alive, Sunny frowned and shook his head.

'Six people... their disappearance won't go unnoticed. Especially if they were really up to no good. Huh... why do I feel like I had just gotten myself in trouble?'

Chapter 100: Clear Conscience | Shadow Slave

The Black Knight remained motionless for several minutes, silently observing the corpses of his enemies. Drops of blood fell from the blade of his fearsome greatsword, gathering into a puddle beneath his feet. The thoughts of the cruel creature were a mystery. To be honest, Sunny wasn't even sure that this unstoppable mountain of murderous black steel was sentient.

In that regard, the monstrous inhabitants of the cursed city were a bit strange.

Usually, Nightmare Creatures of higher classes possessed a perverse form of intelligence, which was often comparable to that of humans, and sometimes even surpassed it. However, that rule did not apply to every monster in this eerie place.

From Sunny's observations, the dwellers of the ruined city could be roughly divided into two groups. The first group consisted of various creatures that came here from outside the wall, be it from the Labyrinth or from the depths of the dark sea. These abominable things more or less followed the unnatural laws of the Spell that every Awakened was familiar with.

The second group was different. These creatures, he suspected, were either created from the remains of the ancient residents of the city or, creepily, had actually been them once. The wraiths, as he called them, were much more unfathomable and dangerous. Their powers and behavior refused to abide by any sort of sense or logic.

The Black Knight was one of these sinister revenants. That's why Sunny had trouble predicting his actions.

Most of the time, the regal devil was content simply patrolling the grand hall of the ruined cathedral and killing anything that dared to come inside.

Just like he had killed those poor fools.

With a sigh, Sunny lay down on top of the support beam and, not paying any attention to the deadly height of his improvised resting spot, closed his eyes. He wanted to take a breath before continuing with his nightly errands.

Soon, the sound of heavy footsteps informed him that the bastard had resumed his neverending patrol.

'Good riddance.'

Despite the fact that nothing was disturbing his peace anymore, Sunny still felt strangely restless. His inner voice was in the mood to chat.

'Uh, Sunny. Aren't you forgetting something?'

He frowned. What was there to forget? He was just catching his breath before going out again. He also had to wait for the right moment to scavenge through the possessions of these dead hunters...

'You just killed six people. Don't you feel guilty?'

Sunny was a little startled by this question. Curious, he listened to his emotions and came to the conclusion that no, he did not feel guilty at all.

This was his third time killing a human being. Granted, the first time happened inside a Nightmare, where people were supposed to be simple illusions. However, Sunny wasn't sure that he believed in this theory. The old slaver's anguish had felt awfully real to be just a figment of his imagination.

The second time... well, he didn't want to think about that. That happened in the castle, anyway, and that part of his life was over.

The third time was the cleanest of them all. Those thugs were going to rob and kill him, anyway. Sunny had seen through their intentions long before pulling on the invisible string and sending their leader into the cold embrace of death.

He could have tried to run away, but... they were very rude. If the thugs had insulted just him, Sunny might have tried to end the confrontation without

bloodshed. However, they insulted Nephis. Bastards deserved to die.

Despite the fact that his relationship with Changing Star had become strained, he still cared about her a great deal. Leaving the castle did not mean that he had forgotten their friendship. It's just that... there were more reasons to leave than to stay.

With a sigh, Sunny summoned the beautiful bottle made out of patterned blue glass. This was the farewell gift that Cassie had given him before their parting. He cherished this Memory very much.

Bringing the bottle to his lips, Sunny took several sips of cold, delicious water and opened his eyes.

He didn't want to rest anymore. Better to get moving...

Before venturing out again, Sunny returned to his room and walked over to a large iron chest that was standing in one of its corners. Exerting some strength, he lifted the heavy lid and admired his treasure pile.

Inside the chest, more than a hundred beautiful soul shards were glowing softly in the dark. The sight of them always lifted Sunny's mood.

Despite the fact that he himself had no use for the soul shards, they were still a valuable resource. Here on the Forgotten Shore, shards were a form of currency among the Sleepers. A hundred of them was an unimaginable amount.

After a lifetime of being a pauper, Sunny was finally rich!

"Money, I have so much money..."

If a person wanted to live inside the castle walls, they had to pay a tribute of one soul shard every week. Those who could not afford it were forced to remain outside, living in a makeshift settlement just beyond the gates, which was often attacked by the monsters. Even so, they had to pay for

food or go out and hunt themselves, which more often than not led to their deaths.

With how much Sunny had gathered in these three months, he would have been able to live in the comfort of the castle for years... if he wanted to. Which, of course, he did not. Why would he pay for accommodations when he already had a palace of his own?

One with no noisy neighbors and a fearsome guardian protecting the premises, no less.

Putting two new soul shards in the chest, Sunny glanced at his dragon hoard one last time and closed the lid with a satisfied smile.

Perhaps it was time to visit the castle again and buy a few things... no, no. He had already bought everything he needed the last time. Spending too many shards would make people doubt that he was as pathetic as everyone thought he was.

Of all the Sleepers in the castle, only three people knew that he was not just good at hiding in the shadows and avoiding danger. They were Nephis, Cassie... and Caster.

That damn bastard...

Chapter 101: Turf War | Shadow Slave

Caster had been lucky enough to enter the Dream Realm near the city and arrive at the castle much earlier than the three of them. By the time Sunny, Nephis and Cassie had found their way to the human settlement, he was already in good standing there.

Despite the fact that there were a lot of opportunities for a talented Legacy to rise through the ranks of Gunlaug's army, he had nevertheless decided to remain independent and eventually joined the Changing Star's cohort, drastically raising their combat strength and reputation.

Looking back, that was when all of Sunny's problems had really started.

"That's right, it was all his fault, not mine. Yeah, definitely!"

Grinding his teeth, Sunny kicked the heavy chest and cursed under his breath. Then, acting as if nothing had happened, he smiled brightly and left the hidden chamber once again.

Down below, things were getting interesting. Attracted by the smell of blood, several monsters tried to enter the ruined cathedral to feast on the fresh corpses. However, the Black Knight was as full of wrath as ever. Just as Sunny climbed onto the support beams, he was finishing off a large creature that looked like a praying mantis made of human skin.

Initially, Sunny planned to take a look at the material possessions left behind by the five unfortunate thugs, but the sight of the ferocious battle made him change his mind. He would have to do it later.

Besides, his shadow had already looked through the bloody remains and came to the conclusion that there was nothing really valuable among the dismembered corpses.

Not wasting any more time, Sunny escaped through the roof of the cathedral and retraced his steps to the place where he had fought the Blood Fiend.

The body of the hunting party's leader was still there. Of course, his Memories had long disappeared, leaving the bearded man dressed only in rags. The heavy battle-axe was gone, too.

Sunny sighed.

"That's why killing people is not worth it."

His shadow covered its face with a hand and shook its head dejectedly, trying to express that his wording was nothing short of unfortunate. Sunny frowned.

"What? It's not!"

And for him, it was doubly so.

When one Awakened killed another, they received a considerable portion of the enemy's soul essence without having to shatter their soul shard. Sunny, however, was not an ordinary Awakened. His Aspect was based on consuming shadow fragments instead.

That meant that even if his enemy had absorbed hundreds of souls shards in the past, Sunny would only receive the number of shadow fragments matching their rank and class, just like he would after slaying a Nightmare Creature. Since all Sleepers were mere dormant beasts, in this case, the number was... one.

"Just one fragment away from four hundred," Sunny said, a bit disheartened.

All that work for nothing...

Some small, rational piece of his mind was actually relieved that killing humans was not very lucrative. Otherwise, in his state... no, he wouldn't. Surely.

"Ah? Wouldn't what?"

Sunny blinked a couple of times, waiting for his inner voice to answer. However, it was strangely silent. Shrugging, he bent down and searched the dead man's body, hoping to find something of value.

However, he was left disappointed. There was no pouch full of soul shards as he had imagined. All Sunny found was a strange piece of fabric that had been secretively tucked away into the tall thug's shirt.

Looking at the fabric, he noticed crude shapes drawn on it with ink. Some shapes looked strangely familiar.

"Is that... a map?"

Indeed, it was a primitive map. The shapes he recognized were the various landmarks located in the neighboring parts of the cursed city. Sunny knew many of them by heart, and had even explored a few in the past.

"A treasure map?"

Suddenly, the strange timing of the hunting party's arrival and their lack of experience made perfect sense. They weren't actually hunters. Instead, they were a bunch of fools who had been swindled by some smart person back at the castle into buying a fake treasure map.

At least that was the most likely possibility.

However...

"But what if it's real?"

Sunny blinked, looking at the map with a mix of distaste and avarice. He couldn't decide whether he should try and follow it or throw it away.

...Luckily, his thought process was interrupted by a thunderous crash.

One of the buildings not far from where he was standing suddenly collapsed, filling the street with a cloud of dust and flying debris. A massive shape flew through the air and heavily crashed against another wall, causing an avalanche of stones to fall down.

The creature tried to stand up, but then twitched and grew still, spilling rivers of fetid blood all over the pavement. It was unmistakably dead.

Sunny quickly hid the map in his armor and dove into the shadows, trying to understand what was happening. Somewhere near, furious roars and the sound of steel clashing against steel could be heard, growing closer with each second.

Strangely, there were no human voices.

"A battle between Nightmare Creatures?"

Such things were not rare in the cursed city, but to Sunny's knowledge, there were very few things capable of challenging the current masters of this street and the adjacent square.

These creatures were not the most powerful among the inhabitants of the city, but due to their unique characteristics, Sunny tried to avoid them like the plague. He saw several monsters much more powerful than anything he would be willing to take on ending up sliced and diced into tiny pieces on that square.

However, none of them was able to give the protectors of the square as much trouble as they were having right now, at least judging by the desperate sounds of the battle.

Intrigued, Sunny decided to take a look.

Hidden in the shadows, he climbed up the tall wall of an ancient building and soon arrived on its roof. Watching his footing, Sunny walked forward until he reached the opposite edge of the building.

From there, he could see the wide square in all its dark glory.

In the middle of the square, a moving statue was fighting against several hulking monsters.

Chapter 102: Stone Saint | Shadow Slave

On a dark square surrounded by ruins of once-magnificent buildings, a vicious battle was coming to an end. The remains of its solemn protectors were lying on the cold cobblestones, ruthlessly shattered into pieces.

Sunny blinked in shock.

'They actually lost.'

He was really astonished. The living statues that used to guard the square were a very tough bunch. As far as Nightmare Creatures of the cursed city went, they weren't the most formidable in terms of size and physical might. However, their strange bodies were extremely durable and capable of withstanding truly devastating amounts of damage.

Aside from that, the stalwart stone warriors were also disciplined, proficient in the use of weapons and utterly deadly. They were able to perfectly coordinate their movements, using strategy and tactics to silently overwhelm opponents whose power far surpassed their own. Countless monsters fell to their blades.

That's why Sunny had always avoided getting into a confrontation with these weird creatures. Even though they weren't Fallen by rank, the stone revenants represented a threat that was enough to make him wary.

However, now the ownership of the square was about to change hands.

The bodies of the previous masters lay shattered to pieces. In death, they looked just like broken statues. Even their metal armor and weapons had turned to stone after the wielders were destroyed.

There were five or six of these stone piles scattered around the square, while the attackers seemed to have lost only three of their numbers — including the massive monster that had been sent crashing through a building earlier. Each body towered above the dark cobblestones like a small hill.

The invaders were of a type of the Nightmare Creature that Sunny had never seen before. These new menacing monsters looked like giant spiders with bodies covered in thick plates of wrought iron. They moved with terrifying speed and force, sending cracks running through the cobblestones with each step.

There were currently two of them left on the square, circling around the lone surviving stone warrior.

The last of the living statues seemed to be a female. Compared to the spiders, she was almost comically small in stature, standing no taller than Sunny himself. The graceful stone creature was armed with a sword and a round shield, wearing a plate armor that covered most of her body, leaving only the eyes exposed. Or, rather, two rubies burning with crimson flames that these creatures had instead of eyes.

Her armor and weapons were black in color, forged from some unknown and incredibly heavy stonelike alloy. Of course, in reality, they were made out of the same stone as their wielder. However, the dark force that had turned the granite body of this Nightmare Creature into the strange approximation of flesh had also turned the stone armor into metal.

Currently, the last of the living statues was standing with her shield raised, the blade of the sword resting on its rim. Her head was lowered, ruby eyes silently following the movements of the two spider monsters.

Sunny didn't know for sure, but he suspected that these spiders were both fallen beasts. In any case, the stone woman was doomed. Her enemies were just toying with her, savoring the helplessness of their victim before finishing the job.

He didn't really care. In fact, he was waiting for the show! Watching Nightmare Creatures slaughter each other was one of his favorite pastimes, and the best thing about it was that it didn't matter who won.

'Come on, get her!'

However, in the next moment, he was surprised. In a strange turn of events, the stone monster lunged at the spiders first. Calmly striking her sword against the rim of the shield twice, she dashed forward with grim determination.

The spider she was aiming at was a second too late to react. However, due to its superior physical form, it was still able to meet the sudden onslaught with a vicious strike of its own. One of its legs shot forward, threatening to shatter the stone body of the attacking living statue into tiny pieces.

The smaller creature deflected the blow with her sword and bashed the spider with the round shield, putting all of her weight and inhuman strength into the strike.

Sunny blinked as the massive body of the Fallen beast was thrown back and toppled over.

The black sword immediately lashed out, sending a shockwave through the spider's guts. A rain of strikes fell on the iron surface of the monster's abdomen, filling the square with the clangor of metal. The stone warrior attacked with savage ferocity, using both the sword and the shield to inflict as much damage as possible in a short amount of time.

Just as the iron plate protecting the soft innards of the monster cracked, the second beast joined the fray. The following bloodbath was nothing short of horrifying.

Despite the fact that the spiders were much faster and stronger, the steadfast stone wraith kept up with them for a while. Her indomitable will and ruthless resolve were enough to give the fearsome creatures pause. Moving with the deadly precision of a bloodthirsty killing machine, the living statue completely disregarded self-preservation in favor of making her enemies suffer.

It seemed as though she was determined to take them to the grave with her.

Soon, the terrible wounds on her body accumulated, making the stone creature look like a vandalized piece of macabre art. However, the spiders

were no better: their fetid blood was spilling everywhere, painting the whole square red. Severed limbs and shards of cracked iron littered the ground, mixing with the shattered remains of the fallen stone warriors.

Finally, one of the spiders fell heavily to the ground and twitched, drawing its last breath. The remaining beast lunged at the staggered stone monster, its countless eyes burning with fury.

The round black shield rose one last time and then flew aside, torn away along with the right arm of the stalwart living statue. However, almost at the same time, the blade of her sword pierced through the massive beast's skull, ending its life just a moment before breaking apart and turning to stone.

Sunny shook his head. What an impressive sight! A lowly Awakened creature slaying two Fallen beasts... Midnight Shard would have liked that fierce last stand a lot.

Come to think of it, this was nothing short of inconceivable. However, the graceful stone warrior paid dearly for performing the bloody miracle.

Staggering once again, she fell heavily to the ground, clearly done for.

The battle for the ownership of the dark square was over.

Nobody won.

Chapter 103: Coup De Grace

As the dust settled, Sunny abandoned his hiding spot on the roof of one of the buildings surrounding the square and jumped down. Avoiding the puddles of fetid blood, he walked among the corpses littering the ground and approached the dying stone monster.

The Nightmare Creature was lying on her back, her body battered and broken. From up close, Sunny was able to see it better.

The black armor of the strange monster was slowly turning to stone. In its gaps, he could see her slightly lighter skin. It was smooth like polished granite and dark grey in color. Streams of ruby dust was flowing from the terrible wounds, looking almost like blood.

Two crimson gems that served her as eyes slowly moved, focusing on Sunny. There was no particular expression in them, just tired stillness. The flames that used to burn inside were slowly dimming.

The statuesque creature stared at him without making a sound. In fact, Sunny wasn't sure that these monsters were even capable of producing sounds. Throughout the whole fight, she had remained eerily silent.

He sighed.

"Life is not fair, huh?"

With these words, he summoned the Midnight Shard and thrust it through the visor of the dying creature's helm. Even at the death's door, the stonelike flesh of the living statue proved to be extremely tough. However, he put enough strength into his strike, not wishing to make the poor thing suffer more than necessary.

He was always glad to kill a Nightmare Creature, but this one deserved a quick death. To be honest, he was very impressed by the small stone warrior's desperate last stand.

"They didn't know who they were messing with. But you showed them..."

At that moment, the familiar voice of the Spell resounded in the darkness:

[You have slain an awakened monster, Stone Saint.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Sunny smiled.

'That's four shadow fragments. Finally! Four hundred and three...'

However, in the next second, he forgot what he was thinking about.
Because the Spell wasn't done talking.

Whispering into his ear, it slowly said:

[You have received an Echo: Stone Saint.]

Sunny's eyes opened wide.

Did he hear it right?

An Echo? He had finally received another Echo?!

Cautiously looking around, Sunny lowered his voice and said to the shadow:

"You heard it too, right?"

The shadow stared at Sunny in exasperation, then gestured at its mouth, lowered its hands and didn't say anything.

He smiled.

"Exactly! That's what the Spell said!"

Humming a song, he paced back and forth for some time, then suddenly flinched.

"Oh, right. I should get out of here. Now that the stone people are gone, who knows what kind of horrors will try to make this square their nest."

He made a move to leave, but then stopped and looked at the scene of slaughter with avarice.

"However... I really should get some mementos first..."

It's not every day that you stumble upon that many dead Nightmare Creatures before the carrion eaters arrive to feast on the corpses. This was a chance he won't get any time soon...

Sunny hesitated for a few seconds, trying to decide which monsters to approach first. The spiders were obviously much stronger. If they were really of the Fallen rank, their soul shards would be incredibly valuable.

However, buying anything with a bunch of Ascended soul shards would be very suspicious. Plus, it would take a while to find the crystals inside the massive bodies of the giant beasts.

The living statues were of the lower rank, but their shattered remains were easy to search. The other inhabitants of the cursed city could arrive at any minute. So...

With a deep sigh, Sunny ran to the nearest pile of shattered stones and kneeled beside it, hoping to notice the gleam of the soul shards as soon as possible.

...He was barely done with the second dead statue when a sudden noise made him stop. Knowing that greed had doomed a lot of people to their deaths, Sunny suppressed the desire to linger here to the last possible moment and quickly dashed away, putting the last crystal he had managed to find inside his armor on the run.

Summoning the kunai, he threw it into the air and then pulled on the invisible string, making the dagger spin around a stone column. As soon as the string coiled itself around the column, he jumped and made the string contract, sending him flying up.

Just like the golden rope, the invisible string that connected the kunai to his wrist was incredibly sturdy and capable of changing its length at will, which allowed Sunny to use the throwing dagger as an improvised grappling hook from time to time.

Using the top of the stone column to jump even higher, he grabbed onto the cracks in the wall of one of the ruined buildings and quickly climbed up. By the time he reached the roof, the noises produced by the approaching creature were already loud enough to make him shiver.

Whatever that thing was, Sunny didn't want to find out. The sound it produced while moving made him think of a giant snake... one with countless mouths, each hissing the notes of a strange, maddening tune.

Luckily, he left the wide square just in time to never meet that abomination.

By the time Sunny had returned to the ruined cathedral, the night was already coming to the end. The eastern horizon was growing lighter, and the sound of the black waves crushing against the city wall was growing restless.

Walking across the support beams stretching above the grand hall, he caught the glimpse of the marching Black Knight and sighed.

One day... he was going to kill the bastard on some glorious day.

But not this day.

Today, he had other things to do.

Reaching the safety of his hidden lair, Sunny put the soul shards into his treasure chest and then sat down on a magnificent wooden chair.

There was an excited smile on his face.

It was finally time to find out what was the difference between a normal Echo and one transformed into a Shadow.

Chapter 104: Soul Arsenal | Shadow Slave

Not wasting any more time, Sunny dove into his Soul Sea.

Despite his changed mental state, it was as calm as always. The silent expanse of still water stretched into the empty distance, with the Shadow Core hovering above like a dark star. Tiny spheres of light floated in the air around it, reflecting on the surface of the tranquil sea.

The silent shadows were still there, standing motionless at the edge of darkness. Compared to before, their ranks had swelled. Monsters of all shapes and sizes were among them now, making Sunny's collection of slain enemies look increasingly impressive. Walking past them, he glanced at one or another from time to time, recalling the thrilling battles with a mix of dread and pride.

This was his personal museum, a dark monument to all his sins.

"Wait... sins? Why sins?"

Just at that moment, Sunny stumbled and stopped. Not too far away from him, a gaunt shadow stood among the menagerie of terrifying creatures, silently staring at him with empty eyes.

That shadow once belonged to a young man, not much older than Sunny himself. He had lived in the ramshackle settlement beyond the castle's gates, struggling to survive like everybody else. Before... before...

Sunny looked away.

"Don't you look at me like that. It was your own fault, fool. You shouldn't have asked me all those questions!"

Out of the three people he had murdered with his own hands, this kill was the only one that made Sunny feel something. Because it wasn't done in the heat of the battle or to settle a personal score. This one... this one was done in cold blood.

It was why he had to leave the castle — among other things.

Sunny grimaced.

"I said stop looking at me! Just stay dead and don't bother me with your nonsense!"

Huffing angrily, he turned away. Soon, he walked past the shadows of the Blood Fiend, the hunting party's leader, and the deadly Stone Saint.

Glancing at the statuesque figure of the stone monster, Sunny forgot all about the gaunt shadow and smiled. He was here to take a look at her Echo, after all.

The prospect of having another Echo under his command was already very exciting. The loyal and strangely personable scavenger had been of great help to Sunny in the past, tremendously increasing his combat performance. After all, despite having a Divine Aspect and a uniquely powerful Ability, Sunny was still just a Dreamer, one whole rank below the Echo.

The scavenger, however, was merely a beast... while the Stone Saint was a monster. Her power was comparable to that of the ferocious carapace centurions, far surpassing anything that Sunny could ever hope to achieve in this cursed place. The strange nature of the steadfast living statue made her even more formidable.

Having a servant like that would make many impossible things possible. However, Sunny wanted even more. He was waiting to see what miracle his Aspect was going to perform, hoping that the results would surpass his wildest expectations.

Soon, he was standing under the black sun of his Shadow Core, observing the spheres of light that represented his Memories.

There were nine of them now.

The ones that he actually used were the Puppeteer's Shroud, the Midnight Shard, the Prowling Thorn, the Ordinary Rock, and the Endless Spring.

Savoring the anticipation, Sunny summoned each of them one by one and read the glowing runes surrounding the Memories.

He had gotten the heavy kunai after defeating a peculiar creature that resembled a monstrous armored porcupine. The rain of jagged bone quills had left several holes in Sunny's body, but the reward was well worth it.

Memory: [Prowling Thorn].

Memory Rank: Awakened.

Memory Tier: II.

Memory Type: Weapon.

Memory Description: [This flying dagger is as unpredictable and fickle as the affection of a young beauty, but, perhaps, not as deadly.]

Memory Enchantments: [Rose of Betrayal].

Enchantment Description: [The Prowling Thorn is connected to its wielder by an invisible string. This string is strong but mercurial — just like the treacherous bond of sentimental attachment.]

After reading this description for the first time, Sunny couldn't help but wonder if the Spell had been scorned by a lover once. The runes practically exuded bitterness.

Next on the list was his most dangerous Memory, the talking rock.

Memory: [Ordinary Rock].

Memory Rank: Awakened.

Memory Tier: I.

Memory Type: Tool.

Memory Description: [Just an ordinary rock.]

Memory Enchantments: [Not Really].

Enchantment Description: [The word is mightier than the sword. The rock is mightier than the word.]

The funny thing was that the Ordinary Rock, which was capable of repeating various sounds, had fallen into the hands of a person who was unable to tell lies. It was now the most honest Memory in two whole worlds.

...It had also made Sunny think twice before opening his mouth. Sometimes.

The last Memory he decided to take a look at was, perhaps, the most precious to him. It was the beautiful glass bottle that Cassie had given Sunny as a farewell gift.

Memory: [Endless Spring].

Memory Rank: Dormant.

Memory Tier: IV.

Memory Type: Tool.

Memory Description: [A lovesick devil had once imprisoned a mighty river in this fragile glass bottle. It was his gift it to a beautiful desert spirit.]

Memory Enchantments: [Gift of Water].

Enchantment Description: [This bottle contains enough water to make flowers bloom in the desolate heart of the most lifeless of deserts].

This one was sort of romantic. It seemed as though the Spell was all over the place when coming up with these descriptions, to the point where Sunny couldn't even tell if it was being serious.

With a sigh, he dismissed the sphere of light containing the Endless Spring and glanced up.

The other four of his Memories were not very useful. They were an incredibly heavy tower shield, a suit of armor that was worse than the Puppeteer's Shroud in every regard, a glass eye capable of producing bright beams of harmless red light, and the obnoxiously loud silver bell — the first Memory he had ever gotten.

The remaining three had been awarded to him for killing comparatively weak monsters on the streets of the cursed city. He was hoping to trade them for something more suitable during his next visit to the castle, whenever that might be.

Forgetting about the Memories, Sunny finally focused his attention on the brightest sphere of light that was floating in the dark emptiness above his head

The one containing his new Echo.

He willed it to descent and watched as the sphere glided down, softly touching the surface of dark water a few moments later. It slowly dimmed, revealing the stone figure hidden within.

Here in the dark silence of the Soul Sea, the Stone Saint looked just like a statue. She was approximately as tall as Sunny, looking miniature in comparison to the rest of the Nightmare Creatures he had to face on the Forgotten Shore.

She was also uniquely human-like in appearance. If not for the dark grey hue and the stonelike nature of her granite skin, Sunny might have even mistaken the strange monster for a Sleeper. Provided, he couldn't see much of her body behind the graceful dark armor.

The nature of these strange creatures remained a mystery.

Chapter 105: Living Stone | Shadow Slave

Previously, Sunny had considered the living statues to be just that, monuments brought to life by evil spirits. There were a lot of revenants like that walking the streets of the cursed city.

Take the Black Knight, for example — Sunny was almost sure that the bastard was actually just a suit of armor with a vengeful wraith imprisoned within it. He had no proof that there was an actual body in that moving steel fortress, at least.

However, after watching the Stone Saint die right before his eyes, he wasn't so sure that she and the Black Knight were the same anymore. There certainly were similarities... even the design of their armors was somewhat similar, as though one had originated from the other. But the stone warrior's armor seemed much more... ancient.

And then there was the ruby dust that flowed from the stone creature's wounds instead of blood. Since when did statues have blood? It was almost like these strange creatures were designed to possess their own weird form of life. Come think about it, the stone warriors resembled artificial beings brought to life by some dark magic much more than they resembled undead creatures.

'Mysteries, mysteries, mysteries all around!'

Perhaps the runes describing the Stone Saint would provide him with some answers.

The Echo, meanwhile, was coming to life. Two magenta flames ignited in her gemstone eyes. The stone of her armor suddenly gleamed with subtle metal shine, the smooth surface of her granite skin turned slightly less rigid. Silently turning her head, the Saint gazed at Sunny through the narrow split of her helmet's visor.

"Let's see..."

He concentrated on the runes.

Echo: Stone Saint.

Echo Rank: Awakened.

Echo Class: Monster.

Echo Attributes: [Battle Master], [Stalwart], [Mark of Divinity].

Sunny blinked. Mark of Divinity? That was the same as his original Attribute! What business did a Nightmare Creature have walking around with the traces of divinity left in its evil, corrupted soul?

And what with these other Attributes...

Battle Master Attribute Description: [Born on the battlefield, the Stone Saint is proficient in all forms of combat.]

Stalwart Attribute Description: [The Stone Saint is highly resistant to all forms of damage, as well as being fully immune to mind and soul attacks.]

Bewildered, Sunny shook his head. No wonder these silent stone warriors were so deadly. They were literally a bunch of killing machines created to last as long and deal as much damage as possible on the battlefield.

But who had created them?

Leaving the Attributes alone, he lowered his gaze and read the next line of runes:

Echo Description: [Deep in the cavernous halls of his dark domain, the last child of the -unknown- had created them from stone to quell the fire burning in his resentful heart. However, that fire only grew hotter. Designed to bring peace, they were instead born into an endless war.]

Huh... the Unknown again. Or rather, their children. It seemed like his theory was correct. The Stone Saint was either an artificial being or a descendant of one. In any case, that was before she was corrupted by...

well. Whatever it was that had corrupted all the Nightmare Creatures, and especially those in the cursed city. Now even gods wouldn't be able to describe what exactly she was.

Not that it mattered. A monster was a monster.

Sunny was more interested in the fact that the traces of divinity that the stone warrior bore had to have come from their original creator, who was at least partially one of the Unknown. Which meant that the Unknown, indeed, were closely related to the gods and to divinity itself.

Just like mysterious Weaver.

Looking away from the runes, Sunny studied the motionless Echo with his altered eyes. What he saw made him smile darkly.

Just like the Memories, the true essence of the Echo was weaved from the countless diamond strings that formed an infinitely complex pattern. Only in its case, the pattern was even more elaborate, dwarfing anything that Sunny had previously seen.

Two embers were burning inside the Stone Saint's body, serving as anchors for the endless strings. One of them was situated in the place where her heart should have been, the other in the lower part of her abdomen.

Sunny closed one eye and looked more closely. And there, behind the shining pattern of the diamond strings, he noticed another, much more primitive and crude system of adamantine threads. They pierced the stone flesh of the Echo, resembling a human nervous system.

These strings were also seemingly made from diamond, but they were much less ethereal. In fact, they were entirely corporeal. Sunny frowned.

'Makes sense... that makes sense. Wait, how does it make sense?'

The Memories and the Echoes were created by the Spell. They were artificial. The Stone Saint, too, was artificial, but in a much more mundane

sense. She was made by a child of the Unknown, just like her Echo was made by the Spell.

Which meant what? That the technique that had been used to create the Stone Saint was eerily similar to the technique that the Spell used, although it did look extremely primitive in comparison.

Could that mean that the Spell itself had come from the Unknown?

Sunny grimaced and shook his head. No, no. Although it was a sound theory, there was too little information to actually consider it substantiated or even remotely believable. He needed to find out more, learn more, uncover more before even beginning to understand the true story that connected the Spell, the gods, the Unknown, and his own life into one nightmarish tapestry.

But there would be time for it later.

Right now, he had something equally as interesting right within his grasp.

Glancing one last time at the graceful stone monster, Sunny gulped and licked his lips. Then, he said timidly:

"Let's... let's do this."

Taking a step forward, he hesitated and then carefully put his hand on the breastplate of the Stone Saint's armor, right across from the place where the main nexus of her Spell Weave was situated.

To his surprise, the breastplate felt like stone and was warm to the touch. It was as though a furious crimson flame was burning inside the Nightmare Creature's chest.

'Huh.'

As soon as Sunny touched the Echo, a new string of runes appeared in the air in front of him.

[Transform Echo into a Shadow?]

He hesitated, once again afraid to make the choice. What was he going to do if the process made the Stone Saint weaker, or even useless?

Trying not to think of this possibility, Sunny sighed and forced himself to say:

"Yes!"

An imperceptible change happened to the Soul Sea, as though a gust of wind suddenly appeared out of nowhere. The tranquil dark water seemed to simultaneously stay still and move restlessly. Then, a sudden pressure came from somewhere above.

Raising his head, Sunny saw two dark beams descending from the depths of the Shadow Core. One of them fell on the Echo, while the other landed on one of the silent shadows that stood motionlessly behind his back, as though connecting them together

Bathed in the dark light, the shadow of the dead Stone Saint slowly dissolved into it.

And then the Echo began to change...

Chapter 106: Creating A Monster

Under Sunny's watchful eyes, the Echo began to change.

The light falling from the Shadow Core seemed to seep into the flesh of the stone creature, making it shine with dark radiance. Wisps of shadowy fog emanated from beneath her impervious plate armor, slowly merging with it. It looked as though the Stone Saint was engulfed in ghostly black flame, being remade by it.

What little color there was on her body was washed away and replaced with nothing but darkness. Only two crimson fires burning in her ruby eyes remained, slightly changing their hue and becoming more menacing.

Of course, all these changes were happening on the surface. If not for the traumatic transformation that Sunny had gone through to inherit a part of Weaver's forbidden lineage, this would have been all he saw.

However, with his eyes altered by the agony of consuming the drop of divine blood, he was able to see much more.

Beneath the surface, the essence of the Echo was being changed as well, in a way much more fundamental than its outer appearance.

The shining embers that served as anchors for the weave of diamond strings had lost their radiance, becoming as transparent and empty as the Shadow Core itself. The diamond strings were gone, replaced by a sea of darkness. That darkness had a form, a shape that perfectly followed the lines of the Stone Saint's body.

It was as though a living shadow was now inhabiting it, usurping the role that had been played by the pattern of the sorcerous strings once.

Although similar in appearance to the original Echo, this new creature was a completely different type of existence. Sunny had never seen anything like it before.

It was created by his Aspect, after all.

The process of transformation, meanwhile, was coming to the end. The ray of dark light cast by the Shadow Core was disappearing, its reflection drowning in the calm water of the silent sea. The black flames were already fully absorbed by the stonelike armor of the Saint, gone with the dark radiance of her smooth granite skin.

Sunny observed the Stone Saint. Clad in the lusterless black armor, with two ruby flames burning in the deep shadows of the visor, she looked like an incarnation of pure darkness, a noble demon sent to wage war against heaven from the depths of hell. What changed the most, however, was her presence.

Before, the Echo felt like an empty shell, a magical tool rather than an actual being. Now, however, there were hints of mysterious will in her crimson eyes, a subtle sense there was a nascent spark of sentience burning somewhere deep within her lightless soul. Or whatever it was that the menacing monster had instead of a soul.

This was a Shadow.

Just as this thought appeared in Sunny's mind, the faintly familiar voice of the Spell resounded above the dark waters of the Soul Sea:

[You have created a Shadow Monster: Stone Saint.]

Hearing these words, Sunny smiled. However, a second later, the smile disappeared from his lips, replaced by a pained expression.

Only now, after the process was complete, he felt a subtle emptiness permeating his whole body. He felt... weakened. The loss of a hundred shadow fragments was finally making its effect known. He had suspected that spending them in this way would reverse the process of power accumulation that had consumed him for these last few months, but it was still an unpleasant feeling.

He was much stronger than he had been during the journey through the Labyrinth, however, some of his physical might was unmistakably gone, leaving him with a bitter feeling of regret.

No, no... he had known that this would happen, and decided to proceed with the experiment anyway.

It was well worth it.

Forgetting about the change in his physical state, Sunny walked around his Shadow and observed her from different sides. The Stone Saint's eyes silently followed his movements, sending glints of crimson light reflecting from the black surface of the tranquil sea.

'This is... amazing. I wonder what she is capable of...'

Summoning the runes, Sunny immediately noticed that there was a new cluster shining right beneath the one describing his Echoes.

Shadows: [Stone Saint].

Excited to learn more about his new pet monster, Sunny was about to concentrate his attention on the runes, but then stopped and glanced down at his own shadow, a little embarrassed.

"Uh... sorry. How are you feeling, buddy? You aren't, uh, you know... jealous or anything?"

The shadow looked away and pretended that it didn't know him. It was seemingly indifferent to the appearance of a new shadow creature in his service, even though this new Shadow had a capital letter to its name.

"Well, I just wanted to say that you shouldn't be. I still value you very much! Even though the Stone Saint is probably capable of slicing powerful monsters into tiny pieces with her sword, while you're still just a useless piece of... uh... an incredibly capable scout and my most trusted confidant, I still appreciate you. Yeah."

He stared at the shadow for a bit and, seeing that it didn't react in any way, turned away.

'This guy, he'd better step up his game. Ha!'

Focusing on the runes, Sunny summoned the description of the Shadow and read:

Shadow: Stone Saint.

Shadow Rank: Awakened.

Shadow Class: Monster.

Shadow Attributes: [Battle Master], [Stalwart], [Spark of Divinity].

Sunny blinked. It seemed as though Stone Saint's divine Attribute had evolved to match his own. Was it because he was her master? This was a nice surprise. However, he still didn't see how she was different from before.

Frowning, he continued to look through the shimmering runes:

Shadow Description: [Shadow Saint was created by the treacherous Lost From Light in the cursed darkness of the Forgotten Shore.]

'Again with this whole treachery stuff. Can I get another epithet, huh?'

But in the next moment, he forgot all about this little frustration. Because the following line of runes showed him something really unexpected.

Just beneath the description, a familiar set of runes shined in the air:

[Shadow Fragments: 0/200.]

Chapter 107: Growing Shadow | Shadow Slave

Sunny stared at the runes, perplexed.

Then, a sudden light of understanding appeared in his eyes. He finally realized what was the principal difference between an Echo and a Shadow.

It was really very simple.

The Echoes were mere replicas of the creatures that had left them behind. They were molded in their image and never changed, always remaining the same as the originals at the moment of their deaths.

Shadows, however, were different. After all, they were mercurial by nature, always changing their forms and shapes depending on the environment. And so, a Shadow was capable of change to some extent, too.

It was capable of growth.

His eyes widened.

By slaying Nightmare Creatures, he was able to absorb their shadow fragments and become stronger. Eventually, his Shadow Core was bound to evolve, turning from Dormant to Awakened... and beyond. The jump in power that came with this evolution was nothing short of unmatched.

Granted, he wasn't sure about the particular details of this process, not to mention that, as a human, he could only become an Awakened after returning from the Dream Realm into the real world, which was impossible to do in this godforsaken place. He also didn't know what would happen if he actually managed to accumulate the thousand shadow fragments that the runes demanded.

But no matter what happened, if he were to continue walking forward on the path of the Awakened, he would eventually outgrow his Memories and Echoes, rendering them weak and useless against the enemies of the comparable rank. He would then be forced to discard them and try to find

suitable replacements, with no guarantee whatsoever that he would actually succeed.

This problem was not as dire when it came to Memories, which were comparatively easy to get. The Echoes, however, were exceedingly rare. Once an Echo grew too weak to accompany its master, replacing it was an extremely tall task.

But Shadows... Shadows were capable of growing with him, becoming more powerful just as he grew more powerful! As long as Sunny was willing to put in the work, his Shadow would never fall behind.

The possibilities that this simple quality opened up were truly endless. It was enough to completely change his plans for the future. In the past, Sunny always envisioned himself as the main force on the battlefield, only relying on Memories and a stray Echo or two to support him.

That was because Echoes of higher ranks and classes were so unimaginably hard to come by. Although much more rare than Memories, there were still many Dormant Echoes around, and a fair number of Awakened ones too. They were mainly shared among Masters and Saints, who were capable of defeating the Nightmare Creature of these ranks with comparative ease.

But battles against Fallen and Corrupted monsters, not to mention anything even more dreadful, were never easy. As such, there were not enough trophies brought back after killing creatures of their kind to make the idea of acquiring an Echo of a higher rank a realistic possibility.

For everyone... except for Sunny.

He could slaughter weaker monsters, get lesser Echoes, and then cultivate them into unstoppable beasts of slaughter. Not bound by the laws of probability and diminishing chances, he could slowly build an army of powerful Shadows to fight his battles for him, and then watch them destroy his enemies from a safe distance while sipping on a cocktail.

Uh... that's what rich people drank, right?

Not to mention that monsters were not bound by the need to pass Nightmares to raise their rank... at least not to Sunny's knowledge. To be honest, he had no idea how Nightmare Creatures evolved their cores. Carapace Demon had seemed to do just fine just by eating the fruits of the Soul Tree and slowly absorbing large amounts of soul essence.

In any case, there was a possibility that he would be able to make the Shadow Saint much more powerful than he himself had the chance to become on the Forgotten Shore.

Perhaps even powerful enough to make his life here truly tolerable.

Looking at the Shadow with excited sparks dancing in his eyes, Sunny grinned from ear to ear.

"You and I are going to accomplish great things together, buddy."

If his own shadow wasn't worried about its place in his heart yet, it would be smart to start worrying about it right about now.

The question that was consuming Sunny's thoughts now was this: how, exactly, was he supposed to feed the Shadow Saint with fragments?

If he could simply transfer some of his own to her, he would do it without a second thought, even though that would diminish his personal strength even further. However, there seemed to be no way to do so. No amount of looking at the runes, touching the silent stone creature or trying to talk to the Spell did the trick.

Sunny even asked for advice from his own shadow, but that guy was in no mood to talk. The scornful word "traitor!" was written all over his expressionless dark spot of a face.

At least that's what Sunny read from it after being met with the silent treatment. In all the excitement, he failed to remember that the shadow was physically unable to speak.

Scratching the back of his head, Sunny paced around the Soul Sea and tried to come up with a reasonable way to stuff some shadow fragments inside the taciturn stone monster.

"Well... the most obvious answer is to go and make her kill some Nightmare Creatures. However, will it work? When my loyal scavenger killed something, it was I who received the fragments, not him. Wait, him? Did Cassie infect me with her childish desire to assign human qualities to everything? It, not him! It was I and not it. Right, that's better. Wait, what was I talking about?"

Glancing at the outside world, Sunny frowned. It was currently the day there... usually, he would be sound asleep by now. Going out during the day was dangerous. He would have to walk outside the shadows, allowing all kinds of Fallen horrors to lay eyes on him.

He only survived for so long in this hell by being extremely cautious, cowardly, and only hunting during the night. He paid a harsh price to learn these lessons, almost losing his life in the process.

But still, still... should he risk it?

Chapter 108: Test Dummy | Shadow Slave

Still undecided, Sunny dismissed the Stone Saint. He was curious to see if the slumbering Shadow would become a sphere of light just like an Echo would.

However, she did not.

As soon as he gave the command, the ornate armor of the stone creature was immediately engulfed in black flame, and with a gust of ghostly wind, she was gone. It seemed as though the Shadow was returned into the embrace of the Shadow Core that had created her, and was now sleeping in its depths, bathed in the invisible waves of nurturing dark flames.

Sunny scratched the back of his head. So, the Shadows literally dwelled within the deepest part of his soul. He didn't really know how to feel about this, but felt that it was strangely fitting.

He was a child of shadows himself, after all.

With a thoughtful sigh, Sunny emerged from the Soul Sea and looked around his secret lair.

Outside the ruined cathedral, the sun was shining above the cursed city. But none of its rays could reach this tranquil hidden chamber. Sunny suspected that once, a long ago, the secret room served as the private quarters of a venerated young priestess who performed sacred rites in this temple.

He had found some of her things in the modest wardrobe that was hidden behind a stone panel, somehow preserved in pristine condition despite the thousands of years that had passed since the city had fallen to the curse of darkness. If not for the lamentable disparity of their genders, he would have had a whole collection of clothes to wear, instead of spending every waking hour dressed in the same good old Puppeteer's Shroud.

There were limits to the amount of abuse that even a fifth-tier armor could withstand. However, in a sense, he was lucky. At least his armor was made

out of soft fabric. It would have been much worse if he had to wear a suit of plate armor or a rusty chainmail instead.

That priestess, of course, had not used the same extravagant method to enter her private quarters. There actually was a doorway that led outside the room and into a concealed corridor that ended with a narrow stairwell. However, the stairs had long collapsed, leaving only a deep vertical shaft behind. This was Sunny's route of escape in case someone or something would find his lair.

Standing up from the magnificent wooden chair, Sunny paced around for a bit and then lighted the fire under a makeshift stove, planning to make himself some late supper. The orange flames illuminated the hidden chamber, sending shadows dancing on its walls.

'Oh, right. I never got fresh meat.'

The night was so eventful that he had completely forgotten the initial purpose of his hunt.

Throwing the last few strips of meat on the grill, he seasoned them with salt and sighed once again. The desire to simply venture outside and get into a fight with the nearest Nightmare Creature seemed more attractive with each minute.

'No, no, no! That's how you end up dead!'

To distract himself from these seductive thoughts, Sunny decided to summon the Stone Saint into the material world and perform a few experiments in the safety of his secret lair.

Standing up, he willed the Shadow to appear.

The secretive chamber was submerged in deep shadows. His own was hidden in one of them, standing with its arms crossed on the cold stone wall. In Sunny's vision, it appeared as a silhouette made from a deeper shade of black.

Usually, an Echo would appear in front of the summoner, weaved from the countless sparks of moving light. However, the Stone Saint entrance was completely different. Instead of materializing out of thin air, she stepped out of his shadow like a sinister dark knight. Wreathed in darkness, her elegant figure emanated a sense of danger and foreboding.

First, two ruby eyes ignited in the depths of the shadow. Then, the darkness came to life and surged forward, taking the form of the deadly stone monster. The sole of her stonelike solleret touched the floor with a loud clang, and a moment later, the Shadow Saint was standing in the middle of his room, her hand resting on the pommel of her sword.

Sunny grimaced, feeling a slight headache.

'So... the shadow was hiding in a shadow, and then the Shadow came out of the shadow to stand with it in the shadows. This is starting to get out of hand. I really need to come up with better terminology!'

He felt that this was a vital problem, but no suitable words came to his mind. Glancing at the silent duo, Sunny hesitantly asked:

"Any ideas?"

Sadly, both his shadow and his Shadow were mute and unable to voice their opinions even if they wanted to. Left with no assistance whatsoever, Sunny sighed.

"Alright, I'll think of something later. For now, let's see what you're capable of."

Summoning his shadow, he wrapped himself in its comforting embrace and faced the Stone Saint, preparing to test her strength. Inhaling deeply, he focused and gave the menacing monster a command:

"Strike me."

Sunny expected that the Shadow would hesitate for a moment, maybe even requiring some persuasion to turn on her master. Instead, the Stone Saint

immediately leaned forward and punched him in the chest without a second thought.

With his physical prowess enhanced by the shadow, Sunny was sure of his ability to withstand one blow from the awakened monster, at least to a certain degree. However, he was wrong.

So, so wrong.

Before he could even react, the armor-clad stone fist crashed into his ribs, making Sunny feel as though he was hit by a train. In the next second, he found himself lying on the floor, surrounded by numerous pieces of broken wood.

'Oh... oh no! My chair!'

The magnificent chair was gone, ruthlessly turned into splinters and firewood by the impact with his back. It was completely unsalvageable.

Sunny's back wasn't doing much better.

Turning onto his stomach with a moan, Sunny spat a bit of blood on the stone floor and weakly raised one hand, giving the Shadow Saint thumbs up.

"Ugh... good, well done. Ten out of ten, just like... crap, that really hurts... just like I expected!"

Casting a furtive glance at the elegant stone knight, he forced a smile out and tried to stand up.

'I think I need to amend some details of the future experiments.'

Next, Sunny was planning to enhance the Stone Saint with the shadow before getting her to strike him again.

However, on second thought, there were better ways to measure her power...

Chapter 109: Soulmates | Shadow Slave

Picking himself up from the floor, Sunny staggered and found his way back to the fire burning under the improvised grill. Glancing at the motionless stone knight, he spat a bit more blood and groaned.

As the appetizing aroma of roasting meat filled the air, the Blood Weave got busy repairing his body. By the time his supper was ready, Sunny was able to breathe without wincing.

Putting the meat on his prized possession — the luxurious silver plate — Sunny prepared to eat.

On the Forgotten Shore, simple everyday necessities like plates were rarer than enchanted swords and magical suits of armor. In the whole cursed city, only Gunlaug and his five lieutenants were able to dine with as much decorum as Sunny.

Granted, he had yet to find even a single pair of chopsticks in this whole damn place, let alone something more technologically advanced, like a spoon. Of course, Sunny could try and make one himself, but that wasn't the same thing.

The Shadow Saint was silently looking at him with her burning ruby eyes. Feeling uncomfortable under her mysterious gaze, Sunny glanced at his plate, then at the menacing stone creature.

"Uh... you want some?"

He raised a piece of meat and offered it to the taciturn monster. However, the Stone Saint showed no reaction at all.

"Well... suit yourself."

Using the Prowling Thorn as a kitchen utensil, Sunny dug in, devouring the juicy meat like a starving animal. With not a single human soul around, he didn't bother with table manners at all.

'Uh... that's the life!'

His perpetually hungry outskirts self would have been really shocked to see this extravagant feast. That was real meat! He had hunted and prepared it himself, no less. More than that, he got to enjoy a similar type of luxury food almost every day.

Of course, that real meat had come from a revolting horror of a monster, but these were just small details.

Chewing on the last piece with a sense of deep satisfaction, Sunny thoughtfully looked at the Stone Saint. It was time to continue...

Earlier, he wanted to see if there was a possible synergy between the different powers that his Aspect possessed. Namely, if the enhancement provided by Shadow Control could be applied to Shadows. Sunny knew that his shadow was able to enhance his body, his Memories, and, with lesser effect, various inanimate objects.

However, it was unable to enhance other humans and Memories that belonged to them, as well as any living creature except for Sunny himself. He had secretly tested it during his travels with Nephis and Cassie to come up with this conclusion.

More importantly, it couldn't affect Echoes.

But what about Shadows?

Giving a mental command, Sunny sent his shadow in the direction of the Stone Saint and held his breath.

Flowing like water, the shadow silently grasped the statuesque monster in its dark embrace. Then, it seemed to disappear, as though absorbed by the stone flesh of the tenebrous knight.

A moment later, Stone Saint's ruby eyes blazed with crimson fire. Her smooth granite skin shined with dark radiance once again, smoky wisps of

the ghostly grey fog oozing from beneath her stonelike armor like dancing flames.

Suddenly, it felt as though the temperature in the hidden chamber dropped by a couple of degrees. Shadows around the menacing creature seemed to swell, becoming deeper and darker, like a vast mantle sewn from boundless empty blackness.

The elegant Stone Saint had always looked dangerous and deadly, but now, she was downright fearsome.

Even without having the Shadow Saint strike him again, Sunny could tell that the experiment ended in a resounding success. It was apparent that the two types of his shadows were practically created for each other. Her power was increased twofold, at least.

A bit peeved, he looked down and sighed.

'Why does she look so much cooler than I do when using the shadow? Shouldn't it be the other way around? I'm the true divine shadow here, me! Where's my aura of mysterious coolness?!'

Shaking his head, Sunny lamented his lack of good looks and simultaneously congratulated himself on becoming the master of such a stylish monster. Technically, it didn't matter how his Shadows looked, just as long as they were powerful. However, he was secretly glad that his first Shadow was not only powerful, but also a darkly beautiful sight to behold.

Killing monsters was great, but killing monsters while looking good was even better.

'Wait... if she can use my shadow, what else can she use?'

Suddenly excited, Sunny finally swallowed the half-forgotten piece of meat and dismissed the Stone Saint. Then, he shifted his perspective to look at the Soul Sea and summoned her again, this time inside it.

The Shadow appeared in the whirlwind of black flames and stood motionlessly upon the still waters of the silent sea. Her mysterious ruby eyes stared at him through the narrow visor of her stone helmet.

Not wasting any time, Sunny looked up at the spheres of light circling around the Shadow Core.

'What if I can equip her with actual Memories?'

What to choose... she was extremely strong and very proficient with her round shield, so wasn't it logical to assume that a tower shield would suit her even better? Coincidentally, he happened to have one of those!

Sunny summoned the Memory that he had gotten in one of the fights on the streets of the cursed city. It was a large, square tower shield that was almost as tall as him. The thing was too heavy and unwieldy to actually use in combat, at least not by Sunny. Plus, he wielded a tachi, which could only perform to its full potential while held in both hands.

Grabbing the cumbersome shield, Sunny walked over to the Shadow Saint and handed it to her with a hopeful smile.

"Here. Take this. Uh... please?"

The Shadow stared at him for a few moments, then lowered her head and glanced at the tower shield.

'Come on. Come on, take it!'

His heart skipped a bit when the statuesque creature slowly raised her hands and grasped the Memory with her stone gauntlets.

"Yes, that's right! Now, use it!"

The Stone Saint obediently brought the shield to her chest.

And then... shattered it.

Sunny froze, his mouth hanging open.

[Your Memory has been destroyed.]

'...What?'

The shards of the broken Memory turned into a river of tiny sparks of light, just like the Echo of the carapace scavenger and the Azure Blade had done before disappearing forever.

'My tower shield!'

Sunny felt a sharp dagger of sorrow stab at his heart. Yes, the shield was of no use to him. But it would sell for so much money in the real world! Why, why did this evil thing have to break it? Why? Wasn't his beautiful chair enough?!

He gazed at the tiny sparks, wanting to cry. However, a moment later, his eyes widened.

Because the river of sparks did not disappear. Instead, it circled around the Stone Saint's body and then suddenly flowed through it, separating into two streams. Each stream was then absorbed by one of the dark embers burning in the depths of the living shadow that was hiding inside the monster's body.

Sunny blinked.

[Stone Saint has grown stronger.]

Chapter 110: Memento | Shadow Slave

Sunny stared at the Shadow Saint, dumbfounded.

The storm of emotions that the destruction of the tower shield had produced was still tugging on his heartstrings, but now, an equally powerful feeling was slowly welling up in his chest. Not knowing how to process all of this, he simply blinked a couple of times and said in a flat tone:

"Huh?"

'So, let me get this straight...'

He gave the shield to his pet monster hoping that she would be able to use it. And she did, sort of. It's just that instead of wielding the Memory, she... ate it.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, wondering if he had finally lost it. But no, the echo of the Spell's voice was still resounding above the dark waters, whispering the same phrase over and over again.

Stone Saint has grown stronger.

With a heavy sigh, Sunny summoned the runes and found the description of the Shadow. Down at the very bottom of it, the runes were slightly changed:

Shadow Fragments: [2/200].

A wild gleam appeared in his eyes. Two fragments... he had received the Memory of the tower shield after slaying a particularly hardy wraith, who, despite its frightening appearance, had turned out to be merely an awakened monster. For killing it, Sunny himself had received four shadow fragments.

But that was because his own Shadow Core was Dormant, and as such, he always got double the reward in battles against creatures of the higher rank — two for each Soul Core that an awakened creature possessed.

The Stone Saint was such a creature herself, so it was logical to assume that she would not receive the same treatment. The tower shield had come from a monster with two awakened cores, so she received two fragments for consuming its Memory.

Which meant that...

With a fire of excitement burning in his eyes, Sunny hurriedly summoned another Memory. A disgusting eye with a menacing vertical pupil appeared from the dissipating brightness of the descending sphere of light.

That eye came from a basilisk-like creature that Sunny had killed a few weeks ago. To survive the battle, he had to fight it with his own eyes closed, relying solely on the Shadow Sense to move through the rubble and dodge the attacks of the deadly beast.

In the end, he had beheaded the vile thing with a slash of his swift blade seconds before being ripped apart by its claws. It was a fine test for his nascent combat skill.

Sadly, the Memory came with none of the powers that the actual beast had possessed. It was only capable of producing a harmless beam of red light, which could only be used for creating mood lighting... at least in the case of Sunny, who could see in the dark.

Grabbing the eye, he held it out for the Stone Saint to take.

The Shadow grasped the disgusting thing, brought it to her chest, and then crushed it in her armored fist. Once again, the Memory disintegrated into countless tiny sparks of ethereal light, which were then absorbed by the darkness hiding inside the elegant creature's body.

[Stone Saint has grown stronger.]

Sunny grinned, then threw his head back and laughed.

So that's how it was... the Shadows fed on Memories! They consumed them to receive power, just like he killed Nightmare Creatures to consume

the remnants of their shadows.

To make sure, he glanced at the runes again and saw exactly what he had expected to see:

Shadow Fragments: [3/200].

Tier-one Awakened Memory, one fragment. Makes sense.

Giddy with anticipation, Sunny summoned the next Memory. A bulky suit of rusty plate armor appeared from the sphere of light and hovered in the air in front of him. This one he had received after burning the towering nest of monstrous, flesh-devouring termites to the ground.

Creating a bonfire in the absolute darkness of the Forgotten Shore's night was a dangerous endeavor, but he had hoped to receive hundreds of shadow fragments by eviscerating the whole swarm of these tiny gluttonous creatures. Judging by the amount of bones littering the ground around the nest, they were a real plague.

Sadly, the entire colony had turned out to be a single demonic being, landing him only six fragments. He even had to retreat without collecting the soul shards from the smoldering remains of the hive, scared away by the approach of several Fallen horrors that had been attracted by the bright flames. The Memory was of little consolation, since his own Puppeteer's Shroud was superior to it in all regards.

But now, finally, it could be of use!

The Stone Saint devoured the armor just like she had devoured the over two Memories. Once again, the Spell announced that the shadow monster had grown stronger. The runes changed again:

Shadow Fragments: [6/200].

Every time the numbers changed, Sunny felt a deep sense of satisfaction. His menacing stone knight was becoming more fearsome with each second.

He suspected that gambling addicts felt something similar in the throes of a rare winning streak.

Caught in the moment, he grasped the next Memory, but then stopped and stared at the small silver bell that lay silently in his hand.

This one... this one was the first Memory he had ever received, barely holding onto life in the bitter cold and terror of the First Nightmare. It was the weakest Memory he had, but also the most meaningful. Sunny had killed one human to receive it, and had used it to kill another.

The Silver Bell was a reminder.

With bleak eyes, he read the runes that shimmered in the lightless emptiness of his soul:

[...a small memento of a long-lost home, which once brought its owner comfort and joy.]

Suddenly drained of the excitement that had been consuming him just a few moments ago, Sunny sighed heavily and dismissed the Memory. There was a dark expression on his face.

Glancing at the motionless Shadow Saint, he turned away.

"That's enough for today... Ah, what a long day. I think I'll go to sleep now."

Leaving the Soul Sea, he stood silently for a few minutes, then slowly walked to his bed and fell on it. Dismissing the Puppeteer's Shroud, Sunny wrapped himself in the blanket and closed his eyes.

He was so tired.

Chapter 111: Lesser Creature | Shadow Slave

Sunny woke up from the oppressive feeling that drowned the whole world. The sunset was drawing near, and with it, the abyssal shadow of the Crimson Spire had once again fallen on the cursed city.

The distant spire could be seen from anywhere in these somber ruins, looming over the Forgotten Shore like an eternal dark omen. It was cyclopean and unimaginably high, with its roots growing from the endless sea of crimson coral and its peak lost somewhere beyond the veil of grey clouds.

In these past few months, Sunny had gotten accustomed to its presence and learned to not pay it any attention. Thinking about the Spire was a sure road to madness.

After all, somewhere inside that inconceivable structure lay their only hope of ever returning home.

And hope was a poison.

Yawning, Sunny stood up and stretched his arms. His good mood, which he had momentarily lost for some strange reason, was already returning.

Now that he had some time to put the events of the previous night into perspective, he understood even more clearly how amazing his luck had been recently. The acquisition of the Stone Saint and her following transformation into a Shadow were nothing short of miraculous.

His life was about to change for the better!

However, Sunny had to think things through thoroughly. He was in uncharted waters in regards to how to cultivate his pet monster.

The initial excitement he felt after realizing that the Shadow Saint was capable of consuming Memories to collect shadow fragments was gone. In its place, there now was a series of uncomfortable questions.

Sunny had spent somewhere around six months on the Forgotten Shore. In all this time, he had only been able to collect three Memories that were suitable to be fed to the Shadow, giving her mere six shadow fragments.

With the current speed of progression, he would have to wait for sixteen full years to see his labor bear fruit and find out what exactly was going to happen once the Stone Saint had accumulated all two hundred shadow fragments that the runes demanded.

Even among the elites of Gunlaug's army, there was no one who had survived on the Forgotten Shore for more than ten years. The King of the Castle himself had only been here for eight, and only lived that long in large part due to luck.

Granted, Sunny's battle ability would grow dramatically once the deadly stone knight was added into the equation, but still, it was too long. He had to think of something.

While he was doing the math, Sunny's eyes fell on the iron chest that stored his painstakingly accumulated fortune of soul shards. Distracted, he froze for a few moments, then hesitantly approached the chest and stared at its lid.

By the standards of the Forgotten Shore, he was an incredibly rich man. His fortune could buy him a lot of things in the castle, from comparatively simple to increasingly rare and hard to come by.

...Some of the things that could be easily bought in that pit of despair he didn't even want to think about.

What interested him the most, however, was the possibility of acquiring a large amount of Memories. Powerful Memories with useful enchantments were not cheap. In fact, they were extremely expensive. But he didn't really care about the quality.

Since Stone Saint could get the same amount of fragments from the most useless of Memories, all he needed was quantity.

If he were to spend all of his shards, her power would instantly leap by a considerable amount. In the future, he would be able to cultivate the Shadow at double the speed, too — half of the materials coming from the Memories he would be acquiring from slaying monsters, the other from the Memories he would be buying with the soul shards the monsters had left behind. That would potentially reduce the overall timeframe to a somewhat sensible period.

However, there was a big problem with this plan.

Once Sunny began to spend a large number of soul shards, he would inevitably draw a lot of attention. Dealing with random daredevils who would try to rob him, while not pleasant, was not a big problem. But if Gunlaug himself were to become interested in his exploits... that would spell disaster.

And then there was Nephis, whose presence made any sort of planning futile for reasons that only she and Sunny knew.

Everyone else seemed to be blind and deaf to the truth, which was the source of the problem.

Sunny frowned and turned away from the chest.

"I might come back to this idea later. But first, I'll have to check if consuming Memories is the only way for a Shadow to grow stronger."

He still wanted to know if the Stone Saint could absorb shadow fragments by slaying Nightmare Creatures, just like he could.

Some time later, Sunny was cautiously moving through the stone maze of the forsaken city. Able to become one with the shadows, he had a certain advantage over anyone else who would dare to explore these cursed ruins in the absolute darkness of the night. However, even he was always just one step away from death.

Attracting the attention of the real masters of the streets, the Fallen creatures who dwelled here from the ancient times, would be the end of him. Sunny had no illusions about that.

Humans only survived here by learning how to avoid the Fallen Ones and seek out weaker monsters to hunt. There weren't a lot of lesser creatures who were able to secure a foothold in the cursed city, so hunting them was always dangerous.

Nevertheless, that was what Sunny had made into his profession, and that was what he was doing now.

Finally, he reached the area where he had observed a particular creature in the past. Surprisingly, Sunny was intimately familiar with that type of monster.

After all, one of them had almost cost him his life in the past.

Somewhere around this particular street, a lone carapace centurion had made its lair.

Climbing atop a tall stone column, Sunny stood motionlessly in the darkness and waited for his prey to appear. Time moved excruciatingly slowly, but a good hunter had to have a lot of patience. His dark eyes pierced the veil of night, observing the ghostly ruins.

One hour passed, then another. Sunny waited.

Soon, his patience was finally rewarded.

From the deep darkness of one of the toppled buildings, a familiar hulking shape appeared in all its menacing beauty. The carapace centurion stepped onto the cobblestones, his black carapace decorated with crimson patterns, two terrifying bone scythes scraping against the stone.

Sunny smiled.

The carapace centurion only had time to take a single step before two crimson flames suddenly ignited in the deep shadows that consumed the

ruined street.

Then, a graceful stone knight stepped out of the darkness. Raising her shield, she rested the blade of her sword on its rim. Wisps of ghostly grey fog were seeping from under her armor, a strange dark radiance emanating from her skin. The darkness around seemed to move, as though wanting to embrace her like a dark mantle.

The two monsters — one massive and savage, one small and steadfast — froze opposite each other.

...And then, all hell broke loose.

Chapter 112: Duel Of The Monsters

Just like in the battle against two Fallen beasts, the Stone Saint attacked first. Striking her sword against the rim of the shield twice, she dashed forward without fear or hesitation.

Of course, Sunny was not sure if Shadows were even capable of feeling fear.

The carapace centurion reacted swiftly and savagely, lunging at her in a furious onslaught of adamantine chitin and jagged blades. In front of this towering creature, Shadow Saint looked meager and slight.

The two monsters collided in the middle of the street, a small shockwave spreading outward from the point of their impact. Dust and small pieces of gravel were sent flying through the air.

Sunny watched the battle with vigilant eyes.

He suspected that these two Nightmare Creatures were somewhat equal in terms of power. The centurion was much bigger and heavier, the impenetrable carapace making it an especially deadly adversary. All carapace creatures were unnaturally tough and strong. It also had the advantage of reach and mass.

The Shadow Saint was equally as resilient due to her heavy armor and stonelike nature. Despite her small frame, the graceful knight possessed a stunning amount of strength. Sunny also had to keep reminding himself that she was not actually human, and as a being made of stone, weighed much more than a human would.

The disadvantage of her size was bridged by battle awareness and skill, making the outcome of the fight unpredictable.

However, that was only true if he failed to account for the dark embrace of his shadow. With its reinforcement, the Stone Saint was unimaginably more powerful.

Sunny was pretty sure that the centurion stood no chance.

Meanwhile, the two monsters were entwined in a ferocious battle. The Shadow Saint withstood the onslaught of bone scythes by bashing one away with her shield and evading the other. Not losing her momentum, she brought the shield down and slammed its edge into the centurion's carapace, causing the hulking creature to stagger.

The force of the impact was so grievous that it sent cracks running through the impregnable carapace. Sunny marveled at the sight, congratulating himself on the decision to not test the augmented monster's strength on himself.

Using the opening that she had created, the Stone Saint twisted her torso and delivered a backhand blow with the boss of the shield, striking the same spot again. The already damaged chitin plate splintered, revealing the soft flesh beneath.

A moment later, she was already moving to evade the fierce retaliation of the savage carapace creature. The graceful knight was miserly in her movements, dodging each strike with measured precision.

Although Sunny was only a novice in the art of combat, he had learned enough to be able to recognize the hints of a distinct battle style in how the Stone Saint fought.

Her whole technique was based in simplicity and economy of movement, each action calculated and efficient. Combining hard blocks, dodges and deflections with grounded footwork and well-timed ripostes, the Shadow was able to create a stark contrast between defense and offense, the former being solid and indomitable, the latter abrupt and inevitable.

It was very different from the flowing and unpredictable style that Nephis had used, and that he himself had been taught. Only now did Sunny realize that the basic katas and forms he had practiced were, in fact, very unique and unusual.

Where did his fighting style come from?

There was a lot to consider here, both in terms of how to improve his current technique and how to incorporate new elements into it. However, that was a task for the future.

Right now, he was more interested in the outcome of the fight.

The Stone Saint was already suppressing her monstrous enemy. A few of the centurion's legs were either broken or severed, streams of azure blood gashing out of the terrible wounds. However, it was still resisting furiously.

But no matter how enraged it became, the silent and menacing poise of the graceful shadow knight was much more terrifying.

Just at that moment, the Shadow Saint sidestepped a downward slash of one of the centurion's scythes and then pinned it under her greave. Using her weight to immobilize the enemy's weapon, she delivered a vicious blow with the rim of her shield and shattered the bone blade into pieces.

The carapace monster screeched, dazed by the loss of its scythe, and immediately tried to eviscerate the loathsome little fiend with the remaining one. However, he was a fraction of a second too late. With one side of its body left defenseless, the Stone Saint now had much more space to attack.

Deflecting the scythe with the shield, she dashed forward and lashed out with an upward slash, severing it near the joint. Continuing the motion, she then stepped through the rain of azure blood and mercilessly thrust her sword into the opening in the centurion's armor that had been created by her at the start of the fight.

The stone blade pierced through the flesh of the monster and devastated its spine. The force of the blow was so immense that the tip of the sword broke through the chitin on the centurion's back.

Pulling the sword out of the dying creature's body with one sharp motion, the Shadow Saint shook the blood off the blade. Then, she indifferently stepped back and froze, seemingly turning into a dark, motionless sculpture. Only the crimson fire still burning in her ruby eyes betrayed that the Shadow was alive.

Sunny held his breath, waiting for the Spell to speak. Soon, he heard its faintly familiar voice:

[You have slain an awakened monster, Carapace Centurion.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Slightly disappointed, he summoned the runes and checked the number of the shadow fragments in his possession.

Shadow Fragments: [307/1000].

'Ninety-three left to four hundred,' he thought automatically.

Then, just to be sure, Sunny glanced at the description of the Stone Saint.

Shadow Fragments: [6/200].

So... just like with the Echoes, the kills performed by the Shadow benefitted her master instead of the monster herself. It seemed as though consuming Memories was truly the only way to feed the Stone Saint.

Sunny frowned.

"Well. That complicates things..."

Chapter 113: Dark Well | Shadow Slave

After the Shadow Saint had ruthlessly eviscerated the carapace centurion and confirmed Sunny's suspicion that he wouldn't be able to cultivate her in that way, he was left with nothing much to do.

The night was still young, but he had already achieved his goal. Now, he was free to do whatever he wished... however, there weren't very many options available in the cursed city.

He could continue to hunt, reveling in the newfound power. With the Stone Saint at his command, Sunny would be able to bathe the ruins in monster blood. However, that thought, no matter how seductive, left him uneasy.

Hunting in this hellish place required patience and preparation. He only survived this long by carefully scouting the potential battlegrounds in advance and studying his prey from the shadows to learn its strengths and weaknesses, not rushing into a fight until he was absolutely sure that there was a solid chance of victory.

Shadow Saint or not, betraying these principles would still get him killed. And with his mental state, uh... slightly unstable, Sunny didn't trust himself to stay cautious once the easy wins kept piling up. He had to proceed slowly.

Looking around the quiet ruins, Sunny smiled slightly. Actually, he wasn't that far from the Library...

He had indeed turned hunting Nightmare Creatures into a sort of profession, but it was just that: a job. Like any well-adjusted young man, he also had a hobby.

In his free time, Sunny liked to explore the ruins.

The warm feeling of satisfaction he had experienced after finding the hidden nest of the Vile Thieving Bird never left his memory. There was something deeply engaging in uncovering fragments of long-lost history

and piecing them together. Maybe Sunny had inherited this passion from Teacher Julius, or maybe it had always been slumbering deep within his heart.

In any case, he enjoyed exploring the ancient city a great deal. It was full of all kinds of mysteries, both large and small. After thousands of years had passed, most traces of the past had been erased by the merciless flow of time. But by looking in the right places and exercising critical thinking, insight and imagination, it was possible to piece together tiny shards of truth.

Every time the seemingly disparate clues clicked into a coherent picture, Sunny felt a pleasant rush. Interestingly enough, it didn't matter whether that picture pertained to something important or completely useless.

In fact, he enjoyed learning about the small details of the daily life that the inhabitants of the ancient city had once led much more than he enjoyed learning about the possible origins of the catastrophe that had befallen them — despite the fact that the latter was directly related to his own survival.

For example, he was very curious to learn more about the young priestess whose private quarters he had made into his secret lair. The things she had left behind told him a lot about how the people of the city used to dress and think about the world, filling his imagination with colorful pictures of crowded streets and solemn cathedrals. But it was still not enough.

His latest exploration project was the ruins of a grand library. Of course, none of the books and scrolls had survived the thousand of years in the cursed darkness. Luckily, the people who used to live in the city before its fall were very fond of stone engravings. He spent a lot of time studying the intact wall carvings, as well as fragments of surviving frescoes.

One fresco, in particular, was especially grandiose and tantalizing, covering the entire floor of the library's main hall. Sadly, it was almost completely buried under rubble. Sunny had managed to clear some of it away, but most pieces of the collapsed roof were too heavy for him to lift. Maybe the Shadow Saint would have more luck.

It was a suitable plan, but, for some reason, Sunny felt strangely reluctant to return to the exploration of the library on that particular night.

'Huh... what else can I do?'

He jumped down from the stone column and approached the dead carapace centurion to carve out some meat and the soul shards.

Come to think of it... come to think of it, the spot marked on the crude map that he had found on the body of the strange hunting party's leader was not that far away, too.

Maybe he could check it out.

Sunny vehemently shook his head.

'No, no... the map has to be fake anyway. Right?'

Trying to suppress the unhealthy fire of curiosity burning in his chest, Sunny concentrated on the task at hand. Once the meat and the shards were in his possession, though, the persistent desire to follow the map returned.

'And if it's not fake, that's even worse. Who knows what kind of horror those fools were searching for?'

Surely, there wouldn't be any treasure or important secrets hidden there. This whole thing smelled of nothing but peril. In fact, it reeked of something sinister, terrifying, and utterly evil.

Sunny sighed.

'But honestly, what's the harm in taking one tiny look? It's just one look... what's the worse that can happen?'

Quietly stepping through the stone rubble, Sunny cautiously approached the spot marked on the map. For some strange reason, very few Nightmare

Creatures seemed to choose this remote part of the city as their hunting grounds. It was as though they were compelled to avoid this place.

Come to think about it, that fact alone would be enough to scare Sunny away. In normal circumstances. But with the Stone Saint hiding in his shadow, he felt a bit braver.

He would be able to run away if anything happens, at least.

Approaching a large building that had been magnificent once, Sunny climbed over the collapsed wall and found himself in a dark and secluded courtyard.

In the center of the courtyard, there was a well. Its round mouth loomed like an open wound in the stone, filled with nothing but empty blackness. The well was covered with a strange, ornate iron grate. It must have weighed several tones at least, as though someone desperately wanted to prevent anything from ever lifting it from its place and leaving the well open.

Sunny gulped before approaching and looking through the grill of the grate. The silent well was so deep that he couldn't see its bottom.

...Maybe there wasn't one.

Picking up a small stone, Sunny dropped it down. The black mouth of the well swallowed the stone, making it disappear.

Many seconds passed, but there was no sound of the rock hitting anything.

Sunny was almost ready to try again, but then...

The well spoke.

A melodic, strangely enchanting voice resounded from its dark depths, filling Sunny's ears with sweetness.

"Ah, a guest..."

He staggered back, his eyes opening wide in fear.

'Nope. Not doing that!'

Sunny wanted to turn around and run away, but something stopped him from following his instinct. He sensed that leaving without finding out more was going to be a wrong decision.

And the voice sounded so... so human-like...

It was like the voice of someone you would want to be your friend.

He shook his head, breaking free from the reverie.

'What were those damned fools up to?! What are they doing there in that damn castle?! I need to warn Nephis... no, wait... I need to find out more first. I'll try to understand what is going on here, but if there's any sign of danger, I run.'

Greeting his teeth, Sunny forced himself to stay still.

A moment later, the well whispered:

"How wonderful. I haven't been fed in a long, long time..."

Chapter 114: Voice Of Darkness

The enchanting voice came from the well in a wave of whispering echoes. It was soft and charming, flowing like a smooth silken melody. It seemed to belong to a young man... if mere humans could even possess such a voice. A divine being would suit it more.

...Or a profane one.

Sunny wasn't in the mood to appreciate the smooth and rich texture of the voice, though.

He was covered in cold sweat.

The echoes whispered:

"...time, ...time, ...time."

In all his time on the Forgotten Shore, Sunny had only met one other creature capable of mimicking human speech. The memory of that encounter still made him tremble.

The thing that had come from the depths of the dark sea in a mantle of fog and stolen Cassie's voice was by far the most terrifying being he had ever met. He didn't even want to remember the utter horror he had felt when the swarm of whispering voices had surrounded him. On that night, Sunny had only been able to keep his sanity intact because of the blind girl's timely warning.

He had only survived the meeting with the creature that possessed a human voice by keeping his eyes tightly shut.

And now, here was another.

'Why were those hunters searching for this ancient horror?'

He frowned. If something sinister was brewing inside the castle, he had to warn Changing Star. But he couldn't do anything before establishing at least some understanding of the entire situation.

That's why Sunny forced himself to stay still despite the fact that every instinct in his body screamed for him to run away. Instinct was not always the best advisor. Humans possessed intelligence for a reason.

...The black fissure of the well loomed in front of him like a pool of darkness. Suddenly, he was incredibly grateful for the immensely heavy ornate grate that kept the charming talker imprisoned in the lightless depths.

Sunny licked his lips and tried to regain his composure. Ready to summon the Stone Saint and the Midnight Shard at any moment, he took a step forward and gazed into the dark emptiness once again.

Then, he slowly said:

"It's... nice to meet you."

He couldn't quite believe that he was trying to communicate with the terrifying prisoner of the well instead of running away without looking back. Life was sure full of surprises.

Until the moment it gave you the last one, of course.

A soft chuckle resounded from the well. After its melodious murmur disappeared in the darkness of the secluded courtyard, the voice said:

"Oh, no... the pleasure is mine..."

The echoes whispered:

"...mine, ...mine, ...mine."

Sunny was considering his next words very carefully.

'My life might be depending on what I say next...'

He couldn't help but remember old fairy tales about terrible monsters that liked to play riddles with lost children. One wrong answer, and the children were devoured, never to be seen again. Was he going to end up in similar danger?

It was still not too late to turn back.

However, before he could ask his question or make the decision to retreat, the thing in the well spoke again. It said:

"So... are you guys going to feed me or not? Not to offend anyone, but lately, you've been very tardy. I have been sitting here by my lonesome for three days already. Or have you decided to try something new?"

Sunny blinked.

'What?'

That... that wasn't exactly what he expected to hear from the mouth of an ancient evil. The thing sounded so... human. He was almost tempted to believe that it actually was.

'That's how it gets you, fool!'

Sunny forced himself to remain vigilant. What did he know about how primordial evils were supposed to talk, anyway? If it was able to steal the knowledge of human language from his head, it would surely be able to steal some other things too.

While Sunny was trying to comprehend what was happening, a few seconds flew by. The voice waited for a bit, then returned:

"Oh, I see. So we are going with starvation now. Well... I have to give you guys some credit, this is your best idea yet. Sadly, it won't work. Do you even know what type of diets we trainees have to follow to debut? I guess not. Actually, I have to thank you. This is a great opportunity to work on my BMI."

The echoes whispered:

"...BMI, ...BMI, ...BMI."

'Wait... what?!'

Sunny stared into the well, dumbfounded. His eye twitched.

'Don't tell me... don't tell me that there is really just some guy sitting on the bottom of that damn well!'

Feeling like the world suddenly stopped making any sense, he rubbed his temples, then asked in a strange tone:

"Who are you?"

The well fell silent.

Sunny tried to remember what the charming voice had told him before. Something about not being fed in a long time. It surely sounded ominous and creepy in the moment, but if he looked at it a bit differently... if the group of hunters he lured to their deaths had been on its way to deliver food to a prisoner... then that would explain why the poor guy had to skip a few meals...

But why would they keep someone imprisoned in this remote area of the ruins?

Meanwhile, the voice spoke again. This time, it sounded tense:

"Wait, you're not one of the... you're not... oh! Oh, gods!"

Sunny covered his face with his hand, realizing what was going to happen next.

"Oh, gods! It's not a human... heavens, I'm going to die. Those damn fools finally got me killed!"

From the perspective of a Sleeper locked inside a well in the middle of the ruins, only two types of beings could come here to find him: either his captors or... Nightmare Creatures.

Sunny revealed that he wasn't one of the captors by asking his last question, which left only one other possibility. The fact that he came to the well during the night, alone, and not using anything to light the way only made the conclusion easier to make.

"Wait, it speaks... oh, gods! I've only ever heard of one other creature on the Forgotten Shore that can mimic human speech... no, no, no! Not like this..."

'Damn, he really does have a nice voice. It's beautiful even when full of despair... huh, what? It's just a voice! Why am I so enamored with... uh...'

Was he so desperate to hear a human voice? Why? He was doing fine on his own. Great, even! Better than ever.

'Focus on the task!'

But what exactly was the task?

Sunny had never expected to find a human at the end of the crude map. What was he supposed to do now?

'I guess the first step would be to find out who the guy in the well is, and how he got there. Then I can decide what to do with him, or if I should do anything at all.'

But there hid the problem... first, Sunny had to convince the young man in the well that he was actually a human, too.

Sunny glanced at his shadow, feeling somewhat helpless.

The shadow was bent over, holding its stomach. Its shoulders were shaking.

Chapter 115: Nightingale | Shadow Slave

Sunny could really understand how bad the situation looked from the perspective of the young man with a beautiful voice.

The only thing that could be worse than approaching a terrifying dark well while thinking that there's an ancient and utterly evil creature hiding inside was to actually be locked inside that terrifying dark well while thinking that some abominable thing was looking down on you from above.

At least Sunny had a chance to escape if things were to turn really bad. The poor guy in the well literally had nowhere to run.

Of course, there was still the possibility that all of this was just a cunning act performed by some incredibly horrifying monster. Sunny had to keep that in mind while exploring the other theory.

'So... if he is indeed a human, how do I make him believe that I'm not a monster?'

That wasn't a very simple task for Sunny. He had never been good at communicating with people in the first place, and three months of complete isolation did not make things any better. In fact, they had made everything worse.

Now, even Sunny sometimes felt uncomfortable when talking to himself.

'Uh... what would Cassie say?'

He cleared his throat.

"Are you a... human? I am too. I am a human, too. We are both... humans."

'Great job, idiot!'

After that abhorrent attempt, Sunny wouldn't be even surprised to find out that he was not, in fact, a human. Who talks like that?

The young man in the well grew silent. Then, he silently said:

"Yeah, it's definitely all over for me. Oh, well. I had a good run, I guess..."

Sunny sighed heavily.

"Stop panicking, you idiot! I really am a human!"

The owner of the charming voice laughed:

"Please forgive me if I don't believe you."

He was using respectful honorifics, as though recognizing Sunny as an elder. Which was logical, given that he believed him to be an eldritch horror. An eldritch horror would technically count as an elder, all things considered.

Sunny groaned inwardly.

"Why are you using honorifics? I bet I'm younger than you."

The young man imprisoned in the well hesitated.

"Wait, you really are a human?"

Sunny smiled with excitement, feeling that he was making progress.

"Yes. I really am."

The voice returned a dozen seconds later:

"How come you're here alone and in the middle of the night? You also don't seem to have any source of light with you. Please don't get angry, sir monster, but that's not exactly something a human would be able to do. Maybe you should work on your story a bit more next time you venture out to devour innocent souls? Just a, well, a piece of friendly advice."

Sunny sighed.

"Very funny. I'm able to walk around the city at night because my Aspect allows me to hide in the darkness. I can also see through it, too. How did you end up in this well, anyway?"

The young man lingered before answering.

"How does one usually end up in these situations? A bunch of thugs decided to shake me down for my Memories. I politely refused, and here we are. They've been keeping me here for a couple of weeks, trying all kinds of methods to get me to transfer the Memories to them. But I must say, their attempts were very clumsy. In terms of knowing how to terrorize people, these fellows are not even anywhere near the laziest of sasaengs."

Sunny didn't know what a sasaeng was, so he just assumed that it was some kind of a horribly malevolent Nightmare Creature. The rest of the story was somewhat easy to believe. Of course, it would take a very special kind of fool to choose the ruins, of all places, to keep a prisoner, but thugs were not known for their intelligence.

Plus, their plan seemed to have worked pretty well right until the moment they had the misfortune of stumbling onto Sunny.

Well... now he knew what this whole thing was about. Just some tiresome human business.

'How disappointing.'

Nephis and Cassie were also not in any sort of danger, at least not with regard to this mess. The mystery was solved. He had wasted a whole night on this nonsense.

"I see. Well... goodbye."

With an annoyed sigh, Sunny turned around and began to walk away. However, the owner of the beautiful voice stopped him:

"Wait! Wait! Are you... are you really human?"

Sunny grimaced.

"I am! I've told you already!"

The young man imprisoned in the well hurriedly asked:

"Can you maybe get me out of here? Those guys are not coming back tonight, I think. If you help me escape, I'll make it worth your while!"

Sunny scratched the back of his head, then frowned:

"In what way?"

After a short pause, the charming voice returned again, this time somewhat hesitant:

"Well, you might not know this, but I am quite a rich person. I have a whole stash of soul shards back in the castle. Some might even say that I have a small fortune. Half of it is yours if you get me out of this pit. That's ten shards, at least!"

Sunny suddenly got an idea. Of course, he did not need the ten shards that the young man was offering. The fact that he had these shards, though... that was potentially very useful.

If he wanted to avoid unnecessary attention when buying Memories with his hoard of soul shards, he would need a suitable proxy. A Sleeper with a lot of shards of his own, one that was indebted to Sunny no less, was a perfect candidate.

He smiled.

"Do people know that you have a fortune?"

The young man answered, a bit of surprise in his voice.

"Do they... know? Yeah, I guess they do. I am known to spend a lot from time to time. On entertainment, as well as, uh... some other things. I'm a patron of arts, one can say."

'Perfect... so no one would be surprised if he suddenly begins to spend shards on Memories.'

However, there was a small problem. Sunny could remove the grate, but he had no way of helping the poor guy climb out of that unimaginably deep well. Even if he was to use the Prowling Thorn, he doubted that the invisible string would reach that far. Its maximum length was not that impressive.

And he certainly was not going to climb into the creepy well himself.

Plus, he still held a bit of suspicion about the charming young man's identity. He was almost certain that he was human... but the remaining tiny bit of doubt was enough to make his paranoia ring the alarm.

After hesitating for a bit, Sunny said:

"What's your name?"

The melodic voice answered:

"It's Kai."

Sunny sighed.

"Well, Kai, I don't know how to tell you this... but unless you can fly, I won't be able to help you escape."

The young man grew quiet. After a long pause permeated with deathly silence, he then said in a strange tone:

"...I can."

Sunny blinked.

"What?"

Did he hear wrong? No, that was unlikely.

...Maybe Kai was just willing to say anything in his desperation to escape.

The prisoner of the well chuckled.

"I can fly. That's my Aspect Ability."

Chapter 116: Deal With The Devil

Sunny considered Kai's words. An ability that allowed the Awakened to fly was not unheard of, but it was rather rare. And here on the Forgotten Shore, where a cursed flood of darkness devoured the world every night, it was nothing short of priceless.

Sunny couldn't even imagine how easier it would have been to traverse the Labyrinth with someone like Kai by his side.

Suddenly, it made a lot more sense why someone like him would possess a small fortune of soul shards. It also explained why his captors were so gentle in their attempts to force the Memories out of the young man. He was much more valuable alive.

Sunny remained motionless for some time, thinking things over. After a while, Kai spoke again, his pleasant voice tinted with a bit of apprehension:

"Well? Will you help me?"

Sunny sighed and walked back to the dark fissure of the well:

"Alright. I'll remove this grate, and you can fly out. However, I don't really need your shards. If you want to come out of there alive, you'll have to do something for me instead."

The prisoner of the well hesitated, then cautiously asked:

"What?"

Sunny smiled.

"I'll tell you when you need to know. Don't worry, it's nothing serious. I just need help completing a few errands inside the castle. So, do we have a deal or not? If not, I'll be on my way. I've wasted enough time here already."

Kai didn't have to think about it too long. Soon, his voice resounded from the darkness once again:

"We have a deal."

It sounded strangely relaxed, as though the young man had become resigned to fate.

Sunny slightly frowned and said:

"Great. One more thing: if you break our agreement and simply fly away, I will find and kill you. This is not a threat, just facts. Do you understand?"

Kai lingered for a bit before answering.

"Yeah, no problem."

Sunny gazed into the black cavern of the well and hesitated. He was more or less sure that Kai was human, but had to be prepared to act immediately in case he was not.

Following his silent command, the Stone Saint came out of the shadows and kneeled near the well, grasping the grate with her hands. The steel of her gauntlets scraped against the ornate iron, and with some visible effort, she slowly moved the heavy grate to the side.

Sunny shivered as he listened to the wrenching sound of iron grinding against stone. The Midnight Shard appeared in his hands, and he lowered himself into a combat stance with grim resolve.

Whatever came out of the well, he was ready to face it.

A few seconds passed, each feeling like an eternity. Sunny was tensely staring into the circle of pure darkness in front of him, waiting to see if he was right to trust the prisoner of the well or not.

Then, several more seconds passed.

...And then a few more.

Nothing happened.

'Uh...'

Sunny tilted his head, then asked with some irritation:

"Aren't you going to come up?"

After a bit of a delay, the charming voice resounded from the darkness once more:

"...You see, I just thought of something."

Sunny sighed and lowered his sword a little.

"What is it?"

Kai was silent for some time, then answered with a bit of wariness:

"Ah, it's just that this grate is so heavy that it wouldn't even budge when I tried to move it. It took all six of my captors to put it in place, actually. And they were all big, strong men. So..."

He hesitated.

"I know that we have already established that we are both human, and it's not that I doubt your honesty, but would you mind explaining to me how is it that you were able to remove it all by yourself?"

The honorifics were back.

Sunny cursed under his breath. This guy was even more paranoid than him!

He was unwilling to reveal his hidden ace to Kai, but the cautious prisoner left him with no other choice. Glancing at the Shadow Saint with a dark expression, Sunny said:

"That thing is too heavy for me, too. But I was lucky enough to get a very strong Echo."

Kai seemed to suddenly become very curious.

"Oh? That is indeed lucky! Very few people in the castle have an Echo. I think I know every one of them by name."

After a short pause, he added:

"...By the way, what is your name?"

Sunny rolled his eyes and said through gritted teeth:

"My name is Sunless."

This conversation was entering dangerous waters. Depending on what Kai was going to say next, Sunny might be forced to climb into the well after all.

Not to save the young man with a beautiful voice, but to silence him forever.

Meanwhile, Kai suddenly laughed.

"Sunless? That name does not sound like something only a soul-devouring demon would be called at all! Zero chance of that, right?"

After saying that, he laughed again, this time with a hint of desperation in his voice.

However, even then Kai's laugh was very pleasant to the ear. More pleasant than his charming voice, even, but Sunny was in no mood to appreciate its melodious sound.

'Goddammit!'

Sunny rubbed his temples. Why didn't anyone ever trust him? He was such an honest young man! The most honest young man in the world, really.

Annoyed, he said in a flat tone:

"Very funny. Now, come out of that well before I change my mind."

Eventually, Kai stopped laughing and said:

"There's no one in the castle with that name. At least no one with an Echo under their command. Do you maybe live in the outer settlement?"

'Oh, come on!'

Feeling the pressure of the Flaw growing in his mind, Sunny closed his eyes and answered truthfully:

"No."

Kai cleared his throat.

"So... you are someone who walks the cursed ruins alone at night, possesses the strength of at least six men, dwells in the darkness beyond the castle walls, and calls himself Sunless. Did I miss anything?"

Sunny grimaced.

"Not really."

For a few moments, there was silence. Then, the prisoner of the well said with a voice full of dark humor:

"Would you climb out of this well to meet a creature like that?"

Hidden in the darkness of the cursed night, Sunny smiled with a bit of menace and said.

"If I was in your shoes, I would. And I think that you should do it, too. Do you know why?"

After a small pause, Kai asked with sincere interest:

"Why?"

Sunny stopped smiling and allowed a cold indifference to seep into his voice:

"Because I can put that grate back anytime."

Without waiting for Kai's response, he ordered the Stone Saint to move the grate a little. A moment later, the horrid sound of iron scraping against stones invaded his ears once again.

Almost immediately, the prisoner of the well changed his tune:

"Uh... alright! Wait! Stop!"

The Shadow Saint released the grate, allowing silence to reign over the lonesome courtyard once again.

Kai was quiet for some time, and then said with dejected reluctance:

"...You'd better not be a demon, alright? Stand clear, I'm coming out."

Chapter 117: Cruel Injustice | Shadow Slave

Sunny felt a soft breeze lightly caress his cheeks, and then something moved in the darkness of the well.

Gripping the hilt of the Midnight Shard tightly, he prepared for the worst. On the other side of the dark fissure, Shadow Saint slowly raised her shield and rested the blade of her sword on its rim.

...However, they had nothing to fear.

A few moments later, a graceful figure appeared in the air, rose above the well, and then gently landed on the stones in front of it.

The corner of Sunny's mouth twitched. The owner of the charming voice was, indeed, human. It was a young man wearing a light lamellar armor, with luscious dark auburn hair and mesmerizing green eyes. His well-fitted armor was made out of burnished brown leather, with deep blue embroidered garments beneath.

However, for a moment, he wished that Kai actually turned out to be a demon.

Because the damn guy not only possessed the most charming voice he had ever heard, but was also drop-dead gorgeous.

Honestly, it was simply unfair!

Kai was tall, slender, and incredibly handsome. His face was small, perfectly shaped and beautiful, with high cheekbones and flawless ivory skin. His green eyes were nothing short of electric, and his lips were soft and full like... uh...

'W—what am I thinking?'

What's more, he seemed to possess that special type of warm charm that made some people almost irresistibly attractive. Sunny wouldn't be

surprised to find out that droves of girls simply fell to Kai's feet every time he happened to casually walk by. Perhaps a few guys, too.

Even worse still, the bastard looked like a genuinely nice person, without the smallest trace of arrogance or entitlement on his pretty face. There were playful sparks of humor hiding deep within his eyes, and one could be absolutely sure that when Kai smiled, cute dimples would appear on his cheeks.

You couldn't even hate the damn guy!

Two weeks spent in the deep dark pit did nothing to lessen his glamour, too.

In short, Kai was the most beautiful person Sunny had ever seen, even compared to other Awakened. He looked like one of those screen idols that people loved to obsess over, only somehow even more attractive in person.

Sunny glanced at himself, feeling a strong desire to grind his teeth in outrage.

'Well, this is just... a cruel injustice, simple as that.'

Meanwhile, Kai noticed the Shadow Saint's burning ruby eyes, which were the only source of light in the absolute darkness of the night, and flinched back with a paled expression on his face.

"Oh no! It's a demon after all!"

Sunny got distracted from his self-pity and blinked. Then, feeling somewhat spiteful, he said:

"I'm behind you, idiot."

Kai froze, then slowly turned around to face him. Sunny didn't fail to notice that the young man held one of his hands out, obviously ready to summon whatever Memory he used as a weapon.

Blinded by darkness, Kai couldn't see him, of course.

'Well, good. Let's not let this fellow know that I'm not as, uh... good-looking as he is for a few more moments.'

Pretending to be perfectly composed, Sunny asked in a calm voice:

"Haven't I told you that I had an Echo? It's her over there. Well, sort of. That is to say, those aren't my eyes."

The handsome Sleeper hesitated for a few seconds, then said:

"Sunless? You really are a human?"

Up until that moment, both of them were just disembodied voices to each other. But now, while Sunny had already made sure that Kai was not some ancient horror... or at least didn't look like one... the former prisoner of the well was still in the dark, both literally and figuratively.

"Last time I checked, I was still human, yes. If you have a Memory to produce light, you can summon it and see for yourself."

Kai lingered.

"Won't the Nightmare Creatures be attracted by the light?"

'Smart and cautious. I like him.'

Sunny shook his head.

"Usually, they would, by this courtyard is really secluded. Plus, there are not a lot of monsters in this area. I guess that's why those thugs chose this particular place to keep you imprisoned."

With a sigh of relief, Kai summoned a paper lantern that glowed with soft yellow light. Sunny hissed.

"Argh! Damn!"

Relying on Shadow Sense to keep track of the young man's movements, he raised a hand and covered his eyes. Accustomed to the darkness, they

weren't ready for such a sudden appearance of light.

Of course, Sunny knew that this would happen. He allowed himself to be momentarily blinded to give Kai some sense of safety and better convince him of his human nature.

"Oh! Sorry."

The beautiful young man lowered the lantern a little and looked up, trying to finally lay eyes on his mysterious liberator.

Then, with a bit of surprise, he slightly lowered his head and looked down.

'Great, that is not humiliating at all!'

Kai stared at Sunny for a few seconds and, after realizing that he was indeed a human, offered him a dazzling smile.

His smile was as charming as the rest of him. Even the cute dimples that Sunny had imagined would inevitably appear on his cheeks were, indeed, there in all their glory.

It was nothing short of obnoxious.

"Well... what a surprise! I was almost certain that you will turn out to be a terrible monster. But you aren't. You really are a human, and such a cutie too!"

Sunny coughed.

'Wha... did he just call me a "cutie"? How dare he! Uh, I mean... thanks? What is happening?'

Meanwhile, Kai frowned.

"But, Sunless..."

"What?!"

The beautiful Sleeper blinked a couple of times.

"Can I ask something? If you really don't live in the castle or in the outer settlement, then where do you live?"

Sunny shrugged.

"I mean, are there many options left? I live in the city."

Kai hesitated for a bit, but then, suddenly, a light of realization ignited in his mesmerizing green eyes.

"Oh! I think I've heard of you! Aren't you that crazy kid that lives alone in the ruins?"

Sunny stared at him with murder in his eyes.

'Why does everyone keeps calling me "kid"? Why does everyone keep calling me "crazy"?! I'm not crazy!'

With a deep sigh, he answered:

"Indeed, that's me. You can call me Sunny, by the way. Once you get to know me better, you'll realize that I am not, in fact, that crazy."

Kai looked at him with doubt. Noticing that, Sunny grinned. He decided to tease the obnoxiously gorgeous young man a little.

Of course, with the limitations of his Flaw, that was going to require a bit of finesse.

Putting too much enthusiasm in his voice, Sunny said:

"And I don't actually live alone! I have plenty of creatures to keep me company, you might even call them my friends. There's a talking rock that sometimes tells me to do stuff. There's also my shadow, it has a lot of interesting opinions!"

He stared at Kai with a sincere smile. When the young man's handsome face became a little pale, Sunny laughed.

"Gee, relax, man. I am just joking around with you."

Then he looked down at the shadow and added in a dark, angry tone:

"They're not really my friends. I actually can't stand that rock, and the shadow and I barely talk these days..."

Chapter 118: Mirror Image | Shadow Slave

Perhaps joking around with Kai was a bit cruel, but Sunny was really annoyed by how ridiculously good-looking the other Sleeper was. Plus, he had not talked to another human in such a long time that his already lacking communication skills had become truly rusty.

Since they were going to visit the castle soon, Sunny had to prepare himself for the inevitable moment when he would be forced to talk to strangers. Stretching his Flaw to its limits was a good practice. He wouldn't want for something like... that accident to happen again.

The unpleasant memory soured Sunny's mood.

Meanwhile, Kai was staring at him with a very strange expression on his face. Sunny cleared his throat.

"Uh... that was a part of the joke, by the way."

The handsome young man continued to stare, his face full of doubt.

'Did I go too hard on this poor guy? He must have been scared out of his wits already... he's probably in an utter panic now. Who wouldn't be a bit apprehensive about meeting a madman? Yeah... maybe it wasn't as funny as I thought.'

Kai cautiously shook his head.

"It's not that. I just feel like I have to inform you about something."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah? About what?"

Kai hesitated, then said in a very calming tone:

"It's about my Flaw. I can actually tell when someone is lying to me. So, uh... when you said that there's a rock that tells you what to do, I knew that it was true right away."

Sunny glared at the beautiful young man with an incredulous expression. Internally, he didn't know whether to laugh or to cry.

'Flaw? How is that a Flaw?! That's a damn superpower, you despicable bastard!'

Why was that Kai so lucky? He had the charming voice, the tall stature, the perfect face. Even his Flaw was a damn blessing!

Coincidentally, it was also a perfect counter to the better half of Sunny's tricks. If Kai had not informed him about this strange Flaw of his, Sunny would have gotten himself into really big trouble pretty soon.

Luckily, the beautiful young man happened to be a very honest guy.

'What an angel!'

While Sunny was seething in outrage, Kai said in a gentle tone:

"So Sunny... what exactly does that rock ask you to do? Do you maybe want to tell me?"

Sunny sighed.

'I'll have to be really, really careful and watch what I say around this guy. '

"Well, you're no fun at all. The talking rock is actually a Memory capable of repeating words. I use it as an alarm occasionally, so it mainly tells me to wake up. As for that stuff I told about my shadow being opinionated... that's also true. Uh, but you already know, I suppose. My shadow has a bit of personality due to its function within my Aspect."

Kai thought about it, then smiled.

"Oh, I see! So it was really a joke. Very crafty. Sorry to ruin it with my Flaw."

Sunny scowled.

"Don't you patronize me..."

Then he stopped, thought about something, and said angrily:

"Wait, if you can tell when someone is lying, then why did I have to spend half an hour convincing you to get out of that well?!"

Kai blinked a couple of times, looking innocent and hurt.

"Well, how do I know if my Flaw works on Nightmare Creatures? I've never had a conversation with one before! A person can never be too careful when making deals with ancient horrors, you know."

Sunny covered his face with a hand.

"Yeah, I know."

Kai looked at him with concern.

"Ah, Sunny? Are you alright?"

"This is those cursed strings of fate screwing with me again. What are the odds of meeting a person whose Flaw is almost the exact opposite of mine? And why is he so goddamn stunning... is that supposed to be the opposite of how I look, huh? Huh?!"

"I am. Anyway. Let's get down to business."

Kai sighed.

"Of course. A promise is a promise. I will help you do whatever it is you want to do in the castle. Shall we go together?"

Sunny shook his head.

"Not yet. I'll have to stop by a place first. Do you know the big ruined cathedral to the south of here?"

The other Sleeper thought for a bit, then nodded.

"I think I do. I fly over that part of the city often, and it's hard to miss. Are you taking me there?"

'Good question...'

On one hand, Sunny didn't want anyone to know where he lived. On the other hand, he didn't trust Kai enough to simply let him return to the castle and wait there.

But moving through the city with a source of light was not something he was prepared to do, either.

Was there a compromise?

"I can't take you anywhere with that lantern of yours. I survive by hiding in the darkness, remember? So you can go on and fly to the cathedral on your own. Wait for me on the roof."

Kai looked south, remembering the location of the ruined temple, and nodded.

"Alright."

Sunny raised a hand, stopping the young man from flying away.

"Wait. Whatever happens, don't go inside the cathedral, okay? I'm not joking. There's a Fallen Devil residing inside, so if you do, he'll butcher you just like he had butchered that bunch of idiots who had kidnapped you."

Kai stared at him in shock.

"What? They are dead?"

Sunny shrugged.

"How do you think I found you in that well? One of the dead thugs had a map on his body. I thought there'll be treasure hidden in the marked location. But..."

The beautiful Sleeper smiled.

"But it was something much better? Aw, thank you for the compliment! I'll be careful not to enter the cathedral, rest assured."

Sunny stared at the smiling Kai for some time, then shrugged in exasperation.

"Sure. Off you go, then. And remember — if you break our agreement, I will..."

"...find and kill me, yeah. Don't worry, Sunny. I never break a promise!"

With these words, Kai raised his head and looked up. A soft gust of wind touched Sunny's skin, and in the next moment, the charming Sleeper suddenly soared above the ground, quickly disappearing into the sky. Soon, only a tiny dot of his paper lantern could be seen, moving south through the black skies like a lonely star.

Suddenly, Sunny trembled.

A cold feeling of dread grasped his heart like an iron grip.

Following the dot of light with his eyes, he whispered:

"...There was a lonely star burning in the black skies, and under its light, the castle was suddenly consumed by fire, with rivers of blood flowing down its halls."

He stood for a while in the darkness, motionless.

If Sunny didn't know better, he would have thought that this part of Cassie's prophecy talked about Kai.

But he did know better.

He had known the truth of that prophecy for some time now.

Lowering his head, Sunny licked his lips and asked the voiceless shadow in a raspy voice:

"Is it... is it already starting?"

Like always, the shadow did not answer.

'What a stupid question.'

Of course not. It had started a long time ago.

Right at the moment when the three of them had entered the ruined city.

Chapter 119: A Fistful Of Soul Shards

It took Sunny some time to find his way back to the cathedral. With the approach of the dawn, the Nightmare Creatures that hunted at night grew restless. He had to be especially careful as he lurked through the narrow streets, keeping to the darkest patches of shadow.

Even though there was no moon or stars in the lightless night of the Forgotten Shore, many of the monsters here had their own ways of perceiving shapes moving through the darkness. Their ability to see in the dark was somewhat offset by Sunny's [Child of Shadows] Attribute, which allowed him to become indistinguishable from any shadow that he dove in.

However, he still had to be cautious. In this cursed place, nothing was ever certain — except for danger, death, and terror.

Some time later, he climbed the familiar pillars of the cathedral and appeared on its vast roof. Walking on the wide ridge separating two slanting expanses of ancient tiles, he approached Kai, who was standing nervously some distance away.

The beautiful young man was grasping a longbow made of horn in his hands, staring into the darkness with a tense expression on his pale face. Sunny stopped a few steps away from him and looked at that bow for a long time.

'There's not much time left.'

To avoid getting an arrow between his eyes, Sunny decided to announce his arrival with a gentle greeting:

"Hey, Kai. I'm here."

The archer turned around with a startled expression and raised a hand, as though trying to summon his lantern. However, he thought better of it, afraid to attract unwanted attention. Instead, Kai gulped and whispered:

"Lower your voice! What if that Fallen Devil hears us?"

Sunny blinked.

'Oh, right. He's a very carefull person.'

Which was a great personality trait to have, as far as he was concerned. The more paranoid, the better. Smiling inwardly, he said:

"Relax, he won't."

Kai stared at him with doubt, then asked:

"Are you sure?"

Sunny gave him a nod.

"Yes."

He was prepared to explain the reason behind this confidence, but, surprisingly, Kai immediately believed him and calmed down.

'Right... he knows when people are lying to him. Which means that he also knows when they're telling the truth. And since I can only tell the truth, he can pretty much believe everything I say without the need to ask unnecessary questions.'

Huh... come to think of it, that Flaw of his was actually very convenient.

Meanwhile, Kai cautiously looked around and asked:

"So, what are we going to do here?"

Sunny gestured at the group of shattered tiles not too far away from them and answered in a calm tone:

"I'm going to climb into that hole and retrieve something from the temple. You just wait here until I return."

Kai's eyes widened.

"Are you crazy? What about the devil?"

What about that bastard? Sunny couldn't help but fantasize about slaughtering the damn creature for a few seconds.

'The day will come!'

Returning to the present situation, he said:

"What about him? I told you, I'm good at hiding. As long as I know who I'm dealing with, they won't be able to notice me unless I want them to."

He had learned that first part of the sentence the hard way. Actually, it was the bastard who taught him that even concealment of shadows had its limits. That's how Sunny ended up with his insides on his outside and in possession of this vital piece of information.

Some lessons you only needed to receive once to remember them forever.

Kai was looking at him with a strange expression again. Sunny frowned:

"What?"

The beautiful young man shook his head.

"No, no. It's just that... it's an awesome Ability. I wish I had an Ability like that, to be honest."

Sunny glared at him and uttered through gritted teeth:

"Says the guy who can fly! Why would you want to hide your perfectly symmetrical face anyway? Tired of being ogled by love-stricken supermodels?!"

Kai sighed.

"Something like that. How did you know?"

Sunny opened his mouth, then closed it again.

"...Anyway, wait for me here. I won't be long."

Throwing a glance at the charming Sleeper, he shook his head and walked over to the hole hidden behind several broken tiles.

Soon, he was back in his secret lair. Looking around with a bit of apprehension, Sunny sighed and removed the rucksack fashioned from the skin of a monster from his back. Then, he unloaded the strips of carapace centurion's meat on the silver plate and walked over to the iron chest.

To be honest, he really didn't want to go anywhere near the castle. The idea alone made him long to stay in this dark, quiet, familiar room forever. But he couldn't. If he wanted to make the Shadow Saint stronger, he had to return to the human settlement and risk facing his fears.

'Whatever. I'll just go in and out. Kai will be the one doing all the work, anyway.'

With a heavy sigh, he raised the lid of the chest and began loading his rucksack with soul shards. Dozens of beautiful crystals were soon glittering inside.

Sunny only took half of them, but the amount was already enough to drive many people to murder.

He couldn't really blame them. On the Forgotten Shore, shards represented money, and money represented life. Without it, you couldn't buy yourself a place within the safety of the castle or procure food without having to risk death in the cursed maze of the city.

Anyone would be willing to commit murder in order to survive.

'Keep telling yourself this.'

With an angry grimace, Sunny shut the rucksack tightly, made sure that no light seeped through its seams, and turned around.

Glancing at his peaceful hidden lair one last time, he shut his eyes for a moment, and then walked away without looking back.

It was time to return to the castle.

...And all the terrible memories he had left there before running away.

Chapter 120: Approaching The Castle

Washed in the ghostly light of the nascent dawn, Sunny and Kai were walking through the ruins of the cursed city. The night was slowly crawling away. Its retreat made one of them feel safer, while the other one grew uneasy without the familiar veil of darkness hiding him from the world.

'I have almost forgotten how mournful this place looks when the sun is up.'

Somewhere in the distance, the waves of the dark sea were halting their eternal assault on the stone walls of the ancient city. These walls had withstood thousands of years of wear and abuse without allowing even a single drop of black water to seep through. Sunny suspected that they would stand unbroken for a thousand years more.

Suddenly uncomfortable, he turned his head west and found the distant silhouette of the Crimson Spire. The menacing structure was looming over the Forgotten Shore like an evil omen, spelling doom to anyone who would dare approach it.

'...Maybe not.'

Sunny had chosen a complicated and meandering route to reach the castle. Kai, who was less familiar with the cursed city, simply followed behind. The charming young man was alert and collected, his bow ready to send arrows flying at any moment.

They had to circle around many areas where especially terrifying creatures were known to dwell and hunt, making slow progress. Still, it was better to be safe than sorry.

At some point, Sunny raised his hand, gesturing for his companion to stop. He peered into the distance with a deep frown on his face.

Kai glanced at him and whispered:

"What is it?"

Sunny brought a finger to his lips before answering:

"Shh. Listen."

Soon, they heard an eerie sound that resembled stifled, heart-wrenching weeping. It was as though there was a crying woman in the fog ahead of them, slowly drawing closer. Her trembling sobs made both Sleepers shiver.

Kai looked at him and asked without much confidence:

"What are the chances that it's actually a human girl?"

Sunny gave him a crooked smile.

"Low."

Without needing to discuss it, they hid behind a large pile of rubble and waited. Pressing himself against the cold stones, Sunny sent his shadow to climb the building and observe the surrounding streets. Kai saw the shadow off with a bewildered look, blinked a couple of times, but didn't say anything.

A minute or two later, Sunny glanced at him and asked:

"Where are your arrows?"

The charming young man hesitated, then said:

"I usually carry a quiver with a few dozen arrows that were specially crafted for me by one of the best blacksmiths in the castle. But the gentlemen who put me in that well... may they rest in peace... weren't kind enough to let me bring it."

Sunny gave him an amused look.

"So that bow of yours is actually useless?"

Kai lingered for a few moments before answering:

"...I also have arrow-type Memories."

"How many?"

The elegant archer lowered his gaze in embarrassment.

"Uh... two. Will that be enough?"

Sunny was silent for a bit, and then answered in a flat tone:

"No. I don't think that will be enough."

Out there in the fog, his shadow was looking at the creature that had been producing the heart-wrenching weeping.

It was not a human girl.

A massive, four-legged beast was walking through the morning mist. Its flesh was rotten and emaciated, hanging from the bones like a tattered coat. Sunny could clearly see the white arcs of its ribs through the holes in the rotting hide, the unnatural darkness hiding behind them, and the powerful jaws of the partially bared dog-like skull that were full of terrifying teeth.

One didn't have to be a genius to understand that the horrid creature was one of the Fallen masters of the ruined city.

As he was looking, the beast opened its maw and produced another long, human-like sob, then stopped and listened, as though waiting for an answer. When nothing happened, it lowered its head and slowly continued on its way.

Luckily, although their hiding spot was somewhat close, it wasn't actually on its path. If nothing changed, the Fallen would walk past without even noticing them. They just had to wait.

Sunny sighed.

"We'll have to stay here for ten minutes, at least. Get comfortable."

Once again, Kai didn't ask anything, simply taking Sunny's word for it. It seemed as though his strange ability to sense lies made the charming Sleeper less prone to having a lot of questions.

Which was a wonderful quality to have, as far as Sunny was concerned.

With nothing to do but wait, they had a bit of time to rest and catch their breaths. Sunny summoned the Endless Spring and took a few sips of cold, sweet water. Noticing that Kai was staring at him, he hesitated, then passed him the beautiful glass bottle.

The charming young man drank greedily, as though someone dying from thirst. Come to think of it...

Feeling a little guilty, Sunny asked:

"When was the last time they gave you water?"

Kai detached himself from the bottle, wiped his lips, and smiled in pure delight.

"Ah. Two or three days ago, I think. Thank you kindly!"

He returned the bottle and looked at Sunny with curiosity.

"Hey, Sunny. Can I ask you something?"

Sunny tensed up and gave the charming archer a dark look.

"You can."

His eyes, however, hinted that he shouldn't.

But Kai either didn't notice the menacing glare or wasn't bothered by it.

"You came to the Forgotten Shore this last solstice, right?"

"Yeah."

Sunny held his breath, guessing what the beautiful Sleeper was going to ask him. How they had survived in the Labyrinth? Why he had abandoned the castle? How he had survived in the ruins? Each of these questions could potentially lead to a disaster.

Kai leaned forward with excitement in his eyes, hesitated for a second, and then said:

"What... what's the top music video in the charts out there right now?"

Sunny blinked.

'Uh... what?'

That was absolutely not what he had expected to hear. Noticing that the charming young man was staring at him with anticipation, he shifted and answered with a bit of uncertainty:

"That... uh... I have no idea."

Kai sighed, clearly disappointed, but then suddenly smiled again.

The smile was wide and dazzling.

"...Can I you ask you another question?"

Chapter 121: Graveyard Of Hope

In the next ten minutes, the foundations of Sunny's worldview were shaken to the core. Kai had drowned him in a torrent of questions... all of which had nothing to do with anything even remotely important!

What interested the charming Sleeper were very strange things like what types of shoes were in fashion, which celebrity wore what to some pompous award ceremony, who of them had a scandal and what was that scandal about, what was the latest dance craze, and so on.

He was endlessly curious about that type of stupid crap and absolutely indifferent about all of Sunny's dark secrets.

It was almost insulting.

What's worse, Sunny felt like a complete fool because he couldn't provide even a single answer. What did he know about fashion and high culture? Nothing!

After a while, Kai's enthusiasm had waned. Looking at Sunny with a comically disheartened face, he sighed and gently asked one last question:

"Sunny, tell me honestly... were you a hikikomori in the real world as well?"

Sunny blinked.

'What is this fool talking about?'

"A hik... a what?"

Kai cleared his throat and offered him an apologetic smile.

"Ah, you know... a recluse? A shut-in? Someone who lives under a rock?"

Sunny stared at the gorgeous young man, feeling like the world completely stopped making any sense ever since they had met.

"What are you talking about? Why would I live under a rock? You would freeze to death! I lived in a cargo container once, but it had four walls and a roof, at least..."

Kai sighed one more time and turned away.

"I see. Well, sorry to bother you. It's just that I've been stuck in this place for about two and a half years now, and life here is so monotone."

His beautiful profile was radiating melancholy and sadness, as though Kai was lamenting something serious, as opposed to utter rubbish.

'Two and half years... that dimwit survived here for two and a half years?'

Sunny was surprised to hear that. Kai seemed like a nice guy, but not exactly someone well suited for the ruthless nightmare of the Forgotten Shore. Perhaps he had underestimated the charming Sleeper... or perhaps there was another, much simpler reason.

Sunny frowned.

There was a group of people who tended to live here the longest. Suddenly suspicious, he asked in a cold tone:

"Are you a part of Gunlaug's gang?"

Kai looked at him with surprise.

Then, he chortled.

"Gods, no! If there's one thing I absolutely despise, it's bullies like him. I would rather die than become one of Gunlaug's minions. Plus, the man has no style. That armor of his is the most hideous thing I have ever seen!"

However, after saying that, he suddenly grew quiet and added after a few seconds in a dejected voice:

"But I do accept jobs from his lieutenants from time to time. That is the reason why he tolerates my existence, so I don't really have a choice."

Sunny hesitated for a bit, but then decided that he believed the other Sleeper. He really didn't look like one of Gunlaug's thugs. Besides, if he had been one of them, no sane person would have dared to kidnap and imprison him. Members of Gunlaug's cohort were nearly untouchable.

Which meant that Kai was, indeed, much more capable than Sunny had given him credit for.

'Interesting.'

Noticing that the eerie sobs of the Fallen beast had grown sufficiently distant, he shifted his perspective to the shadow and made sure that the terrible creature was already far away.

Standing up, Sunny dismissed the glass bottle and said:

"We're safe now. Time to move."

Once they were ready to leave, he summoned the shadow back and prepared to take the first step forward. However, then Sunny suddenly stopped and glanced at the charming young archer with hesitation.

"Hey, Kai. Can I ask you a question as well?"

The older Sleeper smiled, honesty and eagerness written all over his face.

"Of course!"

Sunny was silent for a couple of seconds, then said in a strange voice:

"That armor of yours... do you wear it because it's the best one you could get, or because it looks good?"

Kai looked at him with confusion. Raising one exquisite eyebrow, he said:

"I don't understand the question. Is there a difference?"

Sunny closed his eyes, sighed, and turned away.

"Never mind. Let's go."

As the sun rose above the horizon, they went deeper into the city, slowly approaching its center.

The castle stood on a tall hill in the middle of the cursed city. It was grand and magnificent, with dozens of towers rising into the air, each supported by a number of elaborate arches and columns. Grotesque gargoyles were staring down on the ruins from under the eaves.

The road leading to the castle was as impressive as the castle itself. It was narrow and heavily fortified, circling the hill in a way that allowed the defenders of the castle to endlessly rain arrows down on any possible attacker.

At the end of the road, a grandiose staircase led to the gates of the castle. In front of it, there had once been a vast stone platform, meant to serve as the gathering ground for the soldiers in case the enemy was to somehow breach all but this one last line of defense.

Now, the platform had turned into a makeshift settlement, with small shabby buildings made out of stone, wood, and anything else the inhabitants of this slum could get their hands on standing chaotically here and there, forming messy groups and narrow alleys.

This place did not look like the outskirts where Sunny had grown up, but it had the same unmistakable air of misery, fear, and desperation.

As the two of them approached the outer settlement, several Sleepers greeted Kai with friendly smiles.

"Hey, Night! Glad to see you, man. Where have you been lately?"

Kai smiled in embarrassment.

"Ah, you know. Flying around. What about you, pal?"

While the charming young man was exchanging pleasantries with his acquaintance, Sunny cautiously looked around.

The place had imperceptibly changed since the last time he was here. The settlement itself seemed to be almost the same, with just a few buildings slightly changing shapes. The people, however... people somehow seemed more energized and confident, as though the ever-present fear of death and starvation was not as pressing anymore.

However, there was a strange sense of tension in the air.

'I guess she was busy in these three months, too.'

Finally managing to end the conversation, Kai turned to him and smiled apologetically.

"Sorry about that."

Sunny frowned.

"Why are they calling you Night?"

The charming young man stared at him, then cleared his throat and said with a bit of strangeness in his voice.

"Oh, you really don't know. Well... it's a nickname of sorts. Nightingale, that's how I am known around these parts."

'What a stupid nickname,' Sunny thought, and decided to get things done as quickly as possible.

He couldn't wait to leave this depressing place.

"Alright, since we're here, time to make good on your promise."

Kai gave him a nod.

"Sure. What do you need me to do?"

Sunny looked around, making sure that no one could hear them, and said:

"It's simple. Go into the castle and find out about who is selling Memories, and what the price is. Then come back and report to me."

His companion blinked a couple of times, clearly surprised, then shrugged.

"No problem. But it's going to take a while. If you want the best information possible, of course."

Sunny grimaced.

"Do as you see fit. I'll be waiting for you in that alley over there."

Kai looked at him one last time, smiled, and walked away.

Feeling nervous and tense, Sunny walked over to a secluded alley and rested his back against the wall. He tried to become as small and unnoticeable as possible.

Being here was making his skin crawl. Maybe his decision to come back was a mistake, after all. Maybe he should simply turn around and walk away.

However, he didn't. Deep down inside, he knew that he had to take this opportunity to gather as many Memories as possible, so that his Shadow could become stronger as fast as possible.

Perhaps he would never get this opportunity again.

Time slowly passed. An hour went by, then another. Kai was certainly taking his sweet time gathering the information Sunny had asked from him.

However, nothing bad had happened. Yet.

Sunny was almost starting to believe that he was nervous for nothing, but then, of course, the thing he dreaded the most became a reality.

A calm, painfully familiar voice suddenly resounded from somewhere behind him.

"Hi, Sunny."

He froze, feeling like a beast caught in a trap, and then slowly turned around. A strange, complicated expression appeared on his face.

Forcing out a smile, Sunny licked his suddenly dry lips and said:

"...Hey, Neph. Long time no see."

Chapter 122: Four Months Ago

Nephis changed a lot since the last time Sunny had seen her.

Outwardly, she looked almost the same — tall, firm, and strangely distant, as though existing slightly apart from the rest of the world. She was still wearing the Starlight Legion Armor, which accentuated the graceful lines of her slender, lithe body. Only now, there was also a white cloak draped over her shoulders, close in color to the pristine metal of the elegant plate armor.

Changing Star's silver hair was much longer now, almost reaching her shoulders. Without the short tomboyish cut, she looked strangely mature and feminine, making Sunny's heart beat a little faster. Her calm grey eyes were as striking as ever.

The true changes, however, hid much deeper. Perhaps only a person who knew her as well as Sunny did could notice them, or perhaps it was precisely because he had come to know her so well that the veil of detached indifference shrouding her true self cracked, revealing the deeper feelings beneath.

Nephis seemed to be much more alive now, much more present. Her eyes shined with resolve and determination, radiating an almost infectious feeling of temperate confidence.

...This was her power. The power of conviction.

Sunny shivered under that gaze.

Neph was the person he longed to see the most and, at the same time, hoped to never see again. She was the true reason why he had to leave the castle.

Stirred awake by this fated meeting, a torrent of memories rose to the surface of his mind.

If only he had known at the time...

Well, it would not have changed anything, really.

Four months ago, on the night that they had ventured into the cursed sea on a boat made of demon's bones, Sunny was shivering in the wind.

...After an eternity spent in the cold embrace of darkness, the endless night of their escape was finally drawing its last breaths. He shifted and turned to the east, where a ghostly line of pale lilac appeared over the horizon.

Trembling, he licked his lips and said in a raspy voice:

"Cas. Cassie. It's morning."

After he uttered these words, the last remnant of strength that had kept Sunny going disappeared, and he slumped on the stones, his chest rising heavily and then falling.

A new dawn was ready to bathe the desolate hell of the Forgotten Shore in warm sunlight. They had survived.

The three Sleepers were perched on a giant stone hand that protruded from the black waves, as if held above the lightless abyss by a goddess. Sunny and Cassie were holding each other for warmth, while Nephis was lying in the center of the stone palm, still unconscious. Visible through the gaps in the shattered armor, her ivory skin was pale and listless.

'We did it.'

They had escaped the clutches of Soul Devourer, sailed through the cursed darkness, and even lived through a battle with the horrifying dweller of the depths... by some miracle.

Sunny couldn't quite believe that they had actually managed to pull their daring escape off. From the moment he had learned about the enthrallment hex put onto their minds by the ancient fiend, he felt that the chances of ever saving themselves from the gluttonous evil tree were more than slim.

Perhaps because it had taken away his most dangerous and tested weapon... his mind.

And yet, somehow, they had succeeded.

Utterly exhausted, Sunny closed his eyes and listened to the dark sea as it retreated to hide from the coming sun. Without even noticing it, he slipped into the embrace of sleep.

When he awoke, the sun was already high in the sky. Sunny expected to feel crippled now that adrenalin had left his battered body, but, to his surprise, he wasn't in even half as much pain as he had anticipated. Blood Weave was truly a miraculous Attribute to have for someone as prone to disasters as he was.

Even his broken finger wasn't hurting that much anymore.

Sunny still had to groan while sitting up, though.

Cassie was sleeping by his side, as drained by the events of the previous night as he was... perhaps even more so. Her delicate face seemed vulnerable and pale, twisted in an anxious frown. Sunny sighed.

Nephis had yet to regain her senses. At some time while he slept, the blind girl had used her cloak to cover Changing Star, helping her to preserve some warmth. Neph lay still and motionless, her face drained of all color. Only the quiet sound of her breathing told Sunny that she was still alive.

He trembled, remembering the harrowing sight of her mangled flesh restoring itself in the crucible of purifying flame. Unleashing that flame always took a heavy toll on Nephis, bringing her unimaginable pain and suffering. Who knew what price she had paid to pull herself away from the doors of oblivion? He had not even realized before that she could use it to heal herself.

Perhaps there was a reason why she had never done so in the past. Only time could tell.

'It's time to assess the situation.'

Turning away from Changing Star, Sunny looked around, trying to discern their current circumstances. His heart was heavy.

If they had survived the attack of the tentacle monster and the ensuing shipwreck only to find themselves stranded in the middle of the cursed sea, with no way to continue forward, that would be a truly macabre twist of fate.

To the east of them, there was nothing but the empty expanse of the colossal crater. Same thing for the...

Sunny froze, noticing a dark line in the distance. That was... that was the western edge of the crater. They had almost crossed it!

Feeling a strange excitement grasping his heart, Sunny quickly turned around and looked west. His eyes widened.

For a few moments, his head was silent and empty. Then, a single thought appeared in it:

'We were so close...'

He sat quietly for a long time, forgetting about everything else. A few hours later, Cassie finally woke up. Feeling that he wasn't next to her anymore, she called in a frightened voice:

"Sunny?"

He licked his lips.

"I'm here."

Cassie sat up and stretched her hand out, finding his shoulder.

"Why... why do you sound so strange?"

Sunny blinked, then slowly turned his head to look at the blind girl. A tentative smile found its way onto his face.

"Cassie... we found it. We have found that city you saw."

In the end, Nephis had remained unconscious for two whole days.

Sunny was really starting to worry about her, but then, on the third day, Changing Star had finally come back to her sense. At the time, he was sitting on top of the giant hand's index finger, staring west with a warm, excited feeling in his heart.

They did it! They were finally going to go home!

Sunny couldn't wait to return to the real world. He didn't even care about becoming an Awakened and the corresponding leap in power and status that much anymore.

All he cared about was his soft bed, mountains of delicious food, and limitless hot showers.

Sunny lowered his head and glanced at Nephis, trying to determine if there was anything wrong with her. In the webtoons, one of the characters was bound to suffer from something like amnesia right before things were about to take a turn for the better.

But Changing Star seemed to be fine. She was still the same Neph he had known — tall, firm, and strangely distant, as though there was an invisible barrier separating her from the rest of the world. When the gaze of her striking grey eyes fell on him, Sunny felt his heart beating a little faster.

He smiled.

'Thank gods!'

Nephis frowned, lowered her head, and then asked in a flat tone:

"Why are you smiling?"

Realizing that he was grinning from ear to ear like a fool, Sunny blinked, then tried to shrug with false indifference.

'Abort, abort! Divert her attention!'

"Look behind you."

The sight of what lay in the west was one of the reasons for his good mood, so it wasn't that much of a stretch.

Neph stared at him for a few moments, then sighed and turned around.

Behind her, a tall city wall built of grey polished stone towered above the slopes of the colossal crater.

That wall was a sign that all their suffering was not in vain, and that all their dreams were about to come true.

It was hope.

Chapter 123: Helping Hand | Shadow Slave

Soon after Nephis had finally come back to her senses, they prepared to leave the shelter of the giant stone hand. The morning had just begun, so there was plenty of time to cross the remaining distance and climb out of the deep and vast crater. If all was going to go well, they would meet the next sunset on top of the tall wall of the mysterious city.

Of course, numerous things could go wrong between now and then. But, for some reason, Sunny felt optimistic.

This was a rare moment for his cynical, paranoid heart.

Just like before, Sunny and Neph took turns climbing down a few dozen meters and lowering Cassie to one another with the help of the golden rope. However, they had grown considerably stronger since the last time they had to do it.

Sunny remembered how tiresome it was to descend from the giant knight's statue in that way and chuckled. Now, he felt as though he could do it three times in a row, and considerably faster, too. Even though he had spent the last few days in an endless nightmare and brought his body to the point where it was about to shut down, now, there was nothing but resilient strength filling his muscles.

These two months that they had spent in the perilous hell of the crimson labyrinth, constantly fighting for their lives and slaying monsters that no Sleeper should ever face one after another, had made all three of them much more powerful.

Sunny doubted that a lot of Awakened had ever gone through this ruthless of an initiation and lived to tell the tale. Once he returned to the real world, he would most likely be considered one of the elite representatives of the current generation.

'Huh, that might actually be a problem.'

Well, he could always blame everything on Nephis. She was already close to being a mythical existence — the last daughter of the legendary Immortal Flame clan, one of the few Awakened in history who had managed to receive a True Name in the First Nightmare, the top student in her batch of Sleepers in the Academy, and so on.

People would easily believe that a prodigy like her had been able — and willing — to carry two pathetic weaklings on her back all the way to the Gateway.

Sunny just had to choose his words carefully when describing the events leading up to their triumphant return. Luckily, in that regard, he was a master.

Entertaining himself with such thoughts, he didn't even notice the flow of time. Soon, they were already approaching the ground.

Just before jumping into the soft black mud, Nephis looked at Sunny and said:

"Stay vigilant."

She didn't have to remind him. Sunny knew that the last stretch was often the most dangerous — mostly because it was natural for people to allow themselves to relax in these moments, falsely believing that the worst was already behind them. Numerous Awakened perished tragically with their goal already in sight.

He wasn't planning on becoming one of them.

Sunny carefully lowered Cassie down, watched as Neph helped her step out of the rope loop, and jumped down. He landed on the ground in a nimble roll, immediately jumped to his feet and outstretched one hand, ready to summon the Midnight Shard at a moment's notice.

However, nothing was trying to kill them.

Sunny and Nephis exchanged tense looks, and then slowly walked forward.

With each minute, the distant grey wall was growing closer.

At some point, Sunny gestured for Changing Star to stop and turned around, curious to take a look at the statue whose hand had saved them from drowning in the dark depths of the cursed sea.

Out there on the slope of the colossal crater, slightly tilted to the side, a giant statue of a slender woman dressed in a light flowing robe towered over the black mud. She was lovely and graceful, with a slim waist and delicate arms outstretched to the skies, as though trying to embrace them.

At least that was how she had looked once, a long time ago. Now, one of the arms was broken off, with only its shoulder remaining in place. Luckily, the other one was still there, and had served as a safe haven for the three Sleepers in their moment of desperate need.

Just as Sunny expected, there were seven shining stars carved into the stone surface of her robe.

What piqued his curiosity the most, though, was the fact that just like the giant knight, the graceful woman seemed to be missing her head. Once again, Sunny wondered if these stone titans were created without faces to begin with, or if something had beheaded them much later in a fit of destructive rage.

'...seven severed heads guarding seven seals,' he thought, remembering Cassie's frightening vision.

The mystery of that vision was nothing short of tantalizing. However, it seemed as though it was destined to remain unsolved — Sunny doubted that he would ever come back to this cursed place after returning to the real world.

There were many regions in the Dream Realm, and almost every one of them was far better than the hellish Forgotten Shore.

'To hell with all this crap!'

Sending silent gratitude to the statue that had saved their lives, Sunny turned around and headed west.

...As they approached the section of the slope that was almost vertical, something dangerous finally happened. Just as Sunny was about to step on a wide stone buried in the mud, the stone suddenly shifted and rolled to the side.

A terrible roar resounded across the vast emptiness of the colossal crater, making him shiver in fright.

Fearing that something was crawling from under the soil, Sunny jumped back and summoned his sword. To his side, Nephis was doing the same, while Cassie swiftly stepped back to not be in the way.

...However, there was nothing moving in the mud. No giant beast rose from it to feast on their flesh, no horrifying abomination had extended its limbs to pull them underground into its maw.

Then... what made that terrible roar?

Just as Sunny was trying to understand what was happening, a sharp pain suddenly pierced his right leg. Looking down, he saw... he saw...

The damn stone was chomping on his shin!

The stone, which turned out to be a bizarre Nightmare Creature, revealed a mouth full of long, sharp teeth on its surface. It awkwardly rolled a couple of times to reach Sunny and then tried to dig its fangs into his soft flesh.

It might have bitten Sunny's leg clean off, but, luckily, the leather boot of the Puppeteer's Shroud turned out to be too tough for the stone's jaws. So it was just munching on the leather in powerless resentment.

The situation was painful, but not at all dangerous.

Sunny stared at the stone, then raised his head and glanced at Nephis in bewilderment. Her expression was as indifferent as always, but after all the

time they had spent together, he was able to recognize the similar kind of amusement written clearly on her face.

"Uh..."

Sunny strained his muscles, raised the trapped leg into the air and shook it a couple of times, trying to send the stupid stone flying.

However, the weird monster was really stubborn. With another thunderous roar, it doubled its attempts to gnaw on Sunny's shin, its stone teeth on the verge of shattering from all the pressure exerted on them.

'What a pathetic thing. The only hope of killing me it has is if I die from annoyance,' Sunny thought with a confused frown.

How could a Nightmare Creature like this even exist?!

'I guess there are losers even among their kind, eh?'

Shaking his head, Sunny allowed the shadow to wrap itself around the Midnight Shard and brought the tip of the blade down on the hungry stone with all the strength he had.

The tachi was met with some resistance, but managed to pierce and shatter the monster's stone body in the end.

The bizarre creature died while still trying to take a bite out of Sunny, defiant till the very end.

As the shattered remains of the stone fell into the mud, the voice of the Spell whispered:

[You have slain an awakened monster, Rolling Stone.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

[You have...]

Seeing a strange expression on Sunny's face, Nephis asked:

"What's wrong?"

He looked at her and blinked a couple of times.

"Uh... I just received a Memory."

Changing Star raised her eyebrow and said in an uplifted tone:

"That is great. What type of Memory?"

Sunny scratched his head, hesitated, and then answered:

"Uh. It's a... rock? An ordinary rock..."

Chapter 124: Desolation | Shadow Slave

Soon, they were standing beneath the impregnable stone walls of the mysterious city. Behind them, the great chasm of the vast crater stretched to the horizon.

Somewhere ahead, the lone human citadel in this loathsome region of the Dream Realm awaited. It promised to deliver them from this dark place and bring them home.

Sunny really couldn't wait to be finally done with this nightmare.

The city wall was built from massive slabs of grey granite. Still wet from the cold touch of the cursed sea, the ancient weathered stones looked almost black. Despite the thousands of years that passed since the mysterious builders of the wall had disappeared into the fog of time, it still looked monumental and unassailable.

The joints between the granite slabs were barely wide enough to insert a narrow blade.

Looking up, Sunny tried to guess the height of the wall. It had to be sixty meters tall, at least — twice as high as the Awakened Academy defense barrier, which was constructed with the help of both modern technology and various Aspect Abilities.

For a few moments, he wondered about the people who had erected this wall, the city behind it, and the giant statues that still stood lonesomely on the desolate shores of this cursed land. Their creations had withstood the onslaught of darkness and time, but the creators were gone. Who had they been? What terrible fate had befallen the citizens of the ruined city?

But then, Sunny angrily shook his head. These mysteries had nothing to do with him anymore. He was going home, never to return to this awful pit of horror and despair. Let someone else solve them.

After a short rest, they decided that it would be easier to climb the wall instead of circling it in search of an entrance. Even if they were to find a gate, there was no guarantee that it would be open.

Climbing the wet granite was not an easy task, but they somehow managed. When there was nothing to use as a hold, Sunny and Nephis resorted to using their swords by inserting them into the joints between the slabs. A few unpleasant cuts later, they found the right rhythm and made quick progress.

Enhanced by the consumed soul shards and shadow fragments, as well as the ruthless training regimen of the neverending battle for survival, their bodies were full of strength and endurance. Both of them were at the peak of human physical ability. Pretty soon, they had reached the top of the massive wall and climbed over its edge.

Without even needing to catch his breath, Sunny hungrily crawled forward, jumped to his feet, and gazed down.

In the ensuing silence, he could hear the sound of the golden rope scratching against stone. However, his heart was beating louder.

Soon, Nephis and Cassie joined him.

The blind girl grasped his shoulder and asked, her voice bright and full of hope:

"Sunny? What do you see?"

He licked his lips.

Beneath them, an expansive city lay in ruins. The beautiful stone buildings were broken and shattered, many of them turned into mere piles of rubble. There were no people walking along the wide streets, no clamor of voices to drive away the silence. Under the cold grey sky, the ruined city looked dead and mournful.

It was impossible to say what terrible disaster had happened here, but it was clear that it was not natural. Many of the collapsed houses were blackened by fire, with claw marks cut into the still-standing fragments of walls. Here and there, monstrous bones of ancient horrors protruded from the ground, telling tales of desperate battles that must have had taken place on these streets once, a long time ago.

Looking closer, Sunny felt cold sweat running down his back. There were strange shapes moving through the rubble, and even more hiding in the shadows. Seeing them filled him with an icy sense of dread.

The ruined city was teeming with Nightmare Creatures.

"There is... a vast, ruined city built of weathered stone. And there are numerous monsters wandering its streets. Just like you said there would be."

The tall city wall they were standing on was as wide as a road. It stretched endlessly in both directions, enclosing the vast ruins into a strangely perfect circle. Every so often, there were towers built into its impenetrable granite body, serving as bastions against potential enemies.

Who would have thought that one day this great barrier would serve not to repel the horrible monsters, but to keep the true horrors imprisoned inside?

But Sunny wasn't that interested in the wall. He wasn't even too interested in the monsters. Instead, his eyes were drawn to the tall hill towering above the ruins. On that hill...

"There is a magnificent castle standing on a hill in the middle of the ruins. It looks like... like something out of a legend. Its walls are built from radiant white stone, with tall towers and majestic spires piercing the sky. It stands above the city like a... a symbol of hope, the only thing in this hell that seems to be untouched by the darkness and... and..."

A wide smile appeared on Cassie's face.

"Yes! This is the castle I saw!"

However, Sunny didn't hear her. Just as he was describing the splendor of the bright castle to the blind girl, his gaze accidentally slid behind it.

Now, all he could see was the dark silhouette of a cyclopean tower that loomed above the world like an unholy spear made out of solidified blood. As soon as Sunny saw it, his heart was gripped by an unexplainable fear.

This was the Crimson Spire.

The feeling of horror it emanated was enough to make him never wish to gaze at it again. And yet, he wasn't able to look away.

By his side, Nephis was staring at it too, her thoughts a mystery. There was a tense, dark expression on her face. After a few seconds had passed, Changing Star was finally able to compose herself and turned away.

Looking in the direction of the castle, she frowned and said:

"The final stretch of the way to the citadel might be extremely dangerous. We must not hurry. Let's find a way down first..."

Chapter 125: A Feast In Time Of Plague

Neither Nephis nor Sunny wanted to climb down from the wall, because that would leave them with no path of retreat should something terrible happen. Without the need to discuss it, they had decided to explore the nearest tower and see if there was a suitable way to descend from the wall inside of it.

They followed the slightly bending wall north, keeping an eye on the ruins below. From time to time, Sunny was able to notice the shapes of creatures moving through the desolate streets of the ancient city. However, nothing seemed to be interested in scaling its tall granite bulwark.

For the time being, they were safe.

However, he didn't feel safe. Instead, he kept glancing at the distant axis of the Crimson Spire and shivering.

That thing was seriously way too ominous.

'Good thing we will be out of here soon...'

That was the only thought that kept him from falling into an irrational panic. Their journey through the Forgotten Shore was about to end. They had endured a lot and survived through a lot. At times, he had not even been sure that they were going to make it out of here alive. But now, all their suffering was about to be rewarded. The path to freedom was already in their sight... they just had to overcome this one last hurdle to return home in glory.

...Soon, they were closing in on one of the mighty towers built into the wall. The structure was round in shape, rising above the main embankment by a good dozen meters. There was a wide wooden gate leading inside the tower, which was broken a long time ago, with only a few splinters remaining on the ancient iron hinges.

Behind the doorway, there was nothing but darkness.

Sunny felt that the sight of this entrance was a bit creepy. Of course, darkness was nothing to him. And yet...

Suddenly, Cassie tugged on his shoulder, forcing Sunny to stop. Both him and Nephis turned to her, their hands outstretched and ready to summon their swords.

"What is it, Cassie?" Sunny asked, alarmed.

In some situations, the blind girl was able to recognize danger before they could. Her keen hearing and sense of smell allowed her to sometimes perceive things that normal humans would not be able to.

Now, there was a scowl on Cassie's face. Turning her head slightly, she whispered:

"Listen."

Sunny held his breath and followed her words, straining his hearing to the limit. Soon, he was able to discern a strange sound coming from inside the tower.

Chomp. Chomp. Crunch. Chomp...

It sounded like... like something was being devoured there, flesh and bones being ground by sharp teeth. The nauseating sound of meat being torn and chewed made him grimace.

Sunny and Nephis looked at each other, then summoned their swords. Like usual, before the two of them moved forward, Sunny sent his shadow to investigate the potential enemy.

The shadow glided on the stones, quickly approaching the tower. Then, it dove into the darkness and concealed itself in the vast shade that permeated the structure.

Sunny was able to see inside...

The first thing he saw was several dead monsters lying on the stone in puddles of blood. The bloody trails left on the stone floor suggested that their massive bodies were dragged here by something very powerful. They were cut apart and eviscerated, as though dressed down by an enthusiastic butcher.

Then, he saw a large pile of gnawed bones lying on the stones. Some of them still had pieces of meat stuck to them, while others were split apart and emptied of even the marrow.

The next thing he saw was... a fire burning in a circle of stone shards, with several skewers of monster meat roasting above it.

Next to the fire, the source of the chomping and crunching sounds was sitting on the stones, munching on a well-roasted rib.

...It was a human.

In fact, it was a young woman. She seemed to be only slightly older than the three of them.

Sunny blinked.

The young woman was tall and attractive. She had hazel eyes and beautiful brown hair, currently tied in a simple braid. Her build was extremely athletic, with perfectly defined lean muscles rolling under the dewy olive skin with each movement. And there was... uh... a lot of skin on display, since she only wore a provocatively short white tunic, augmented with bronze greaves, vambraces, and a cuirass with leather pteruges.

While Nephis was slender and lithe, this stranger radiated a sense of vitality and vigor. Everything about her was lavish and generous, screaming of strength, potency and power.

The strangest part, however, was that there was an absolutely relaxed, comfortable, and happy expression on her face. In the months spent on the Forgotten Shore, Sunny had never, even for a second, allowed himself to lower his guard completely. Neither had Nephis or Cassie.

Even in the rare moments of rest, sheltered in reliable safety, they were always slightly tense, expecting all kinds of horrors to fall on them in an onslaught of teeth, poison, and claws. Even while under the hex of the Soul Devourer, there was always an invisible shadow in their hearts.

However, the young woman seemed to be completely content with being in this cursed place. In fact, she looked happier than Sunny had ever been, even in the real world.

As Sunny watched, the young woman messily devoured the meat of the unfortunate monster. The juices were flowing down her face and fingers. Done with the meat, she bit on the bone itself.

His eyes widened.

The adamantine bone of the Nightmare Creature was easily crushed between her teeth, and, closing her eyes in pleasure, the girl proceeded to suck out the marrow, then chew and swallow most of the bone itself.

Crunch. Crunch. Chomp. Crunch...

Finished with the rib, she threw its remains into the disturbingly sizable pile of bones at her feet, loudly burped with no decorum whatsoever, then immediately stretched her hand out to pick up another piece of monster meat from the fire, and sunk her teeth into it.

Sunny blinked a couple of times more, then shifted his perspective back and looked at Nephis.

"What did you see?"

He lingered for a bit, and then said in a hesitant tone:

"Well... it's either a very hungry human girl. Or a very gluttonous demon."

Chapter 126: Effie | Shadow Slave

Nephis stared at him for a few moments, then turned her head to Cassie and said:

"Follow behind us."

The three of them cautiously approached the entrance to the tower and lingered there, uncertain of how they should proceed.

In their minds, there were two outcomes to this unexpected situation.

One, the mysterious young woman would turn out to be a local Awakened. In that case, all their problems were going to be solved. If an Awakened happened to meet a group of Sleepers in the wild reaches of the Dream Realm, it was customary to guide them to the nearest human Citadel.

Of course, exceptions happened, but in general, Awakened strived to take care of Sleepers — in this alien land, humans had to band together. It was not only a moral obligation, but also in their own best interest.

Two, the stranger would turn out to be a Nightmare Creature. In that case, they were going to have a tough fight on their hands. Since the rank and class of the enemy were unknown, it was impossible to predict the result.

They just had to risk it.

Drawing a deep breath, Sunny followed Nephis into the cool darkness of the tower. Immediately, the appetizing smell of roasting meat hit his nostrils.

...His stomach growled.

'Crap!'

Before Sunny could react, a piece of bone flew past his head and hit the wall with enough force to shatter into tiny pieces. Belatedly, he raised the

Midnight Shard and assumed a defensive stance.

But it was a little too late. The young woman had already been alerted of their presence.

Raising her head, she bared her teeth in a wide grin and murmured:

"Is someone hiding in the shadows? Why don't you come out to play..."

Her voice was deep, smoky and had a raspy huskiness to it. But what mattered the most was that she was speaking in the human language.

She was human!

Probably...

The stranger was still sitting in a relaxed pose, but Sunny didn't miss the subtle tension in her carved muscles. He had no doubt that the alleged Awakened could explode into a whirlwind of violence at any moment.

It was better not to provoke her.

Glancing at Neph, he followed her example and dismissed his sword. Then, the three of them hesitantly stepped into the circle of light cast by the bonfire.

The young woman looked at them in surprise and raised her eyebrows:

"Humans? Huh! Unexpected."

Then she smiled and shook her head.

"Ah, where are my manners?"

With that, she lightly rose to her feet. The white fabric of her tunic shifted slightly, revealing even more of her toned, powerful thighs.

Sunny blinked.

He had assumed that the stranger was tall, but only now did he realize how imposing her true height was. The woman stood considerably taller than even Nephis, not to mention Sunny himself. Complete with her robust physique, olive skin and archaic armor, she looked like an ancient goddess.

Craning his neck to look her in the eyes was sort of irritating, though. But Sunny had no choice. If he were to just look straight, his line of sight would land directly on her shapely... uh...

The young woman, meanwhile, wiped her dirty face with a forearm and gestured at the fire.

"Here, would you like to take a seat?"

Despite the polite invitation, they hesitated. After several seconds passed in awkward silence, Nephis finally took a step forward and asked the question that had been tormenting all three of them.

With her voice uncharacteristically tense and full of suppressed emotion, she cautiously said:

"Are you... are you human?"

The stranger stared at her with a blank expression, then blinked a couple of times.

"What else would I be? A horse?"

With that, she threw her head back and laughed loudly, amused by her own silly joke. Nephis and Sunny glanced at each other, confused as to what to do.

Meanwhile, the young woman giggled a few more times and looked at them with sparks of glee dancing in her eyes.

"Of course I am human! Why are you even asking? Anyway, come sit. My neck is tired from looking down on you."

With that, she sat down near the fire and assumed a relaxed pose. Nephis, Sunny and Cassie finally approached and lowered themselves to the stones, looking at the tall girl with hungry flames burning in their eyes.

She looked them over, then frowned a little.

"Haven't seen you guys around. Are you new?"

Nephis gave her a nod.

"Yes. We have just reached the city."

She was trying very hard to act like a normal, well-adjusted person. It seemed that her endless attempts to improve her social skills had not been in vain. If Sunny didn't know how awkward and clumsy Nephis's natural state was, he wouldn't have suspected anything.

The young woman grinned.

"In that case, my condolen... wait. You guys survived for two whole months in the Labyrinth?"

She whistled and looked at them with newfound respect.

"That's a real feat. Congratulations."

Nephis lingered for a few seconds, then said:

"I'm Nephis, and these are my companions, Cassia and Sunless. We are Sleepers who came here during the winter solstice."

The young woman gave them a wide, friendly smile.

"Nice to meet you! I'm Effie. Well, at least that's what people call me. I'm also a Sleeper."

Sunny frowned. So the beautiful giantess was not an Awakened, just a Sleeper like them. Strangely, he didn't remember ever seeing her in the Academy. Still...

Too impatient to remain silent, he leaned forward and said:

"Are you from the castle? There are people living there, right?"

Effie glanced at him. In her eyes, there was a hint of a strange emotion.

It almost looked like... pity.

"...There are indeed people living in the castle, yes."

Nephis and Sunny exchanged excited looks. Then, Changing Star cautiously asked:

"Can you take us there?"

Effie shrugged.

"Sure, no problem. Do you guys have shards?"

Sunny blinked. What did soul shards have to do with any of this? They had retrieved two from that weird stone he had killed at the base of the wall. Was she going to ask for payment?

Nephis retrieved the soul shards and showed them to the tall girl.

"We have two."

Effie sighed.

"Only two? Well... it's better than nothing, I guess. Keep them. You'll need them later."

Not quite understanding the meaning of her words, Changing Star lingered, then said uncertainly:

"We were hoping to reach the Citadel and access the Gateway as soon as possible. How long will it take?"

The young woman stared at them for a long time, and then suddenly bent over in a fit of hysterical laughter. She laughed so long and hard that tears soon appeared in the corners of her eyes.

Unpleasantly surprised, the three Sleepers stared at her in shock. None of them understood the reason for this bizarre behavior.

'Is she... insane?'

Sunny frowned, reevaluating the situation. Previously, the local girl just seemed to be a bit eccentric. But maybe there was more to it...

Effie's laughter stopped as abruptly as it had started. Wiping her tears, she shook her head and said in a strange tone:

"Ah, sorry guys. I just couldn't help myself. Please, forgive my lack of manners."

Then, she straightened her back, looked them heavily into the eyes, and said:

"I can take you to the castle, but there is no Gateway there. In fact, there's no way out of this cursed hell at all. I've been stuck here for three years myself already. So... welcome to the Dark City, I guess. Abandon hope all ye who enter here, and all that..."

Chapter 127: Abandon All Hope

...Shellshocked by her words, the three of them stared at the young woman with pale faces. Sunny felt something brittle and precious shattering in his heart, piercing it with an almost physical feeling of pain.

'No. No, it can't be.'

It just couldn't be true. How could... how could all of this have been for nothing?

How could all of his hopes, dreams and desires just be destroyed with a couple of words?

How was it possible?!

Somewhere beside him, Cassie suddenly said in a tiny voice:

"What do you mean, there is no Gateway?"

Effie shrugged.

"It's very simple, really. I'm sorry to be the one to break it to you, but deep down inside you must have known already. Didn't you? The Forgotten Shore... it's not really a place where humans are supposed to survive. That's why you have never heard of anything like it in the school or the Academy."

Sunny's face got contorted with anger. Of course! Of course, the answer was always within his grasp. He was just too naive and foolish to grasp it.

The Dream Realm was vast and strange, with most of its regions barely explored by humans. However, there was at least a small amount of information available about them. Some were even fully under human control, with large Citadels like Bastion providing shelter to hundreds of thousands of Awakened.

And yet, when he had first come to the Forgotten Shore, Sunny didn't recognize any of the unique characteristics of this place. At the time, he had thought that his patchy education was to blame.

He should have realized the truth when neither Nephis nor Cassie managed to succeed where he had failed. Why would a region as unique as this one be utterly unknown? The most logical explanation would be that no one had ever returned from this deadly abyss to the real world to tell others about it.

What a fool he was! Just a few weeks in the comfortable life in the Academy, and he had completely forgotten that the world never played fair against people like him. The truth was always worse than his worst expectations, so why would this time be any different?

The world was a predator that always waited for an opportunity to devour you.

Why would he even expect anything else?

A familiar bitter taste appeared in his mouth.

Meanwhile, Effie continued in a gentle tone:

"Fifteen years ago or so, a group of powerful and desperate Sleepers managed to reach this city and claim the castle for themselves. Not because it had a Gateway, but because it was the only place that could keep them safe. At least for a while. Ever since then, a few lucky or resourceful people would find their way to the castle each solstice, only to get stuck here with the rest of us."

Nephis was sitting quietly, with only her clenched fists betraying the storm of emotions raging in her heart. Cassie was taking the news harder than both of them, though. After all, it was her vision that led them into this trap.

Her face was deathly pale, with an expression of pain and shock contorting its delicate lines. Closing her eyes, she whispered:

"But that's... that is not fair!"

Effie looked at her with pity. Then, she chuckled, smiled darkly and said:

"When was anything ever fair?"

...She was right, of course. Justice didn't really exist outside of the ethereal realm of human imagination. Sunny had learned that lesson a long, long time ago.

While he was stewing in his indignant despair, Effie's smile suddenly lost its grim undertone and turned into a happy grin once again. Leaning forward a little, she said:

"But it's not all bad! At least you have met me. You guys are incredibly lucky, really. If you hadn't run into a local, you would have been dead already."

Nephis stared at her and asked in a flat tone:

"Yeah? Why is... that?"

Her awkward manner of speech was back again in all its glory.

Effie sighed.

"The Dark City is simultaneously the safest place to be on the Forgotten Shore, and also the deadliest. It is safe because no sea monster can cross the wall, let alone reach the castle. But at the same time, it is far more dangerous than the Labyrinth because almost every Nightmare Creature here is of the Fallen rank."

Sunny blinked, feeling a cold shiver permeate his whole body. Fallen creatures... Fallen creatures were immeasurably more powerful than Awakened ones. Dormant humans like them had no business fighting against the latter, let alone the former. One awakened demon was already more than they could handle without resorting to summoning a true terror from the depths of the cursed sea.

Something much more powerful than the Carapace Demon would simply wipe them out from existence in a matter of seconds. Remembering

countless shapes moving through the ruins, he couldn't help but tremble.

Was each... each of those shapes a Fallen monster? How would anyone survive even a day in this cursed city? They would have to be insane to even try!

Slowly, the magnitude of the perilous trap they had found themselves in began to seep into his mind.

Effie smiled.

"But you guys managed to stumble into me before descending from the wall. Otherwise, the Fallen Ones would have been feasting on your souls already. Lucky, very lucky! There are very few people in the castle who go out hunting in the ruins, let alone venture so far away from it. Meeting an experienced hunter like me was probably your only chance to avoid finding out about the true face of the Dark City a second too late."

She shook her head.

"That's, like... one to one thousand? Ten thousand? A million? At any rate, the odds were really not in your favor. Fortune is definitely in love with at least one of you, guys. So... cheer up! Do you want some meat? I had a truly amazing hunt today. It was so amazing that I don't even mind sharing."

Nephis didn't even look at the roasting meat and instead leaned forward, her words filled with intensity:

"If there is no Gateway here, why didn't you try to leave?"

Effie blinked a couple of times and looked at her with sincere confusion.

"...Leave? And go where?"

The meat was about to become burnt, so she leaned to the fire and removed the skewers, then replaced them with a couple of new ones. Then, with a sigh, she turned to Changing Star and said:

"You've been to the Labyrinth, so you know what it's like. There's nothing else but that damn coral and cursed sea for months of travel in every direction. You can't go on foot, you can't swim. You can't even fly, because there are swarms of dreadful flying abominations hiding in the clouds. But try to leave? Yeah, many have tried. They're all dead now. Actually, that's how the initial master of the castle had perished."

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"So, what? You guys just hide in the castle and wait for death?"

The beautiful young woman laughed.

"Of course not, doofus!"

Then she pierced him with an unexpectedly grim look of her hazel eyes and said:

"Most of us can't even get into the castle. The king demands his tax, you know? So we just wait for death outside."

Chapter 128: King Of The Hill

Sunny stared at her, trying to understand the meaning behind the strange words.

"What do you mean?"

Effie shrugged.

"The castle belongs to a man named Gunlaug. If you want to enter and live in the safety of the castle walls, protected and provided for by his hunters, you need to pay a tribute. One shard each week."

...Of course there was exploitation going on even in this pit of despair. What else did he expect? As long as there were people, someone was going to end up as prey.

Sunny sensed a familiar dark feeling rising up from the depths of his soul. At some point, he had lulled it into a slumber and forgotten it, but now it finally returned to its rightful place.

A corner of his mouth curled up.

"What happens if you can't pay the tribute?"

The huntress glanced at him with confusion.

"What do you think? You are not allowed to step anywhere near the gates. There's a small settlement for us unfortunate wretches beneath the castle walls, where we make do with what little we have and tremble in the night, hoping that nothing comes out of the darkness to devour us. That's pretty much it."

He hesitated.

"But how are people even supposed to get soul shards in this cursed place?"

Effie gestured to the corpses of the monsters she had slain.

"By hunting. One can find Awakened creatures here and there in the city. The trick is to find and kill them without stumbling into something far more deadly. Gunlaug's people form parties and go out to hunt, with experienced pathfinders leading the way. They bring back food, Memories, materials and shards. Nothing stops people from attempting the same."

She fell silent for a few moments, and then said in a darker tone:

"Of course, without good Memories, vast amounts of accumulated soul essence and intricate knowledge of the city, those people usually don't live long. Most of them either die or turn to other ways of earning shards. There's very few independent hunters with more than a couple of successful hunts to their names. Ones that are still alive, I mean."

Sunny glanced at the dead monsters, each of them large enough to give him pause.

"What about you? How many did you survive?"

Effie smiled.

"More than a couple."

With a chuckle, she raised her hand and began folding fingers, a thoughtful expression on her face:

"Let's see... one, two... uh, five..."

Running out of fingers on one hand, she scratched her head and said with a bit of uncertainty:

"I'm not really sure, but it should be around a hundred or two. Yeah."

Sunny's eyes widened. Two... two hundred?

If what Effie had said was true, then she was a force to be reckoned with. Slaying even one Awakened creature was worthy of respect. Slaying

hundreds of them, however, was nothing short of remarkable, perhaps even heroic... and a little fearsome. Especially since she had hunted them alone in the middle of a cursed ruin full of Fallen abominations, unaided, with no one to rely on except for herself.

The easygoing huntress was not as simple as she appeared.

He frowned.

"If this is true, then you should have had no problem paying the tribute to stay in the castle. This doesn't make sense. Why haven't you?"

Effie shrugged with ambivalence. The topic didn't seem to interest her.

"Let's just say that I don't like the... ambiance there."

Sunny wanted to learn more, but suddenly, Nephis spoke again, her voice strangely tense:

"You said that there were... other ways of earning soul shards. What are they?"

The huntress turned to her and was silent for a while, a hint of some dark emotion in her eyes. However, it was quickly erased by her usual laidback smile:

"Well, there's a few ways. If you have a useful Utility Ability, you can become a craftsman or an artifex in the castle. There's not a lot of such Sleepers, so they are well-regarded and cared for. If not, uh... there are other opportunities, too. Boys can become Gunlaug's soldiers, while girls... can enter his harem. Pretty ones like the two of you especially. No one will force you, of course."

Nephis scowled. Sunny could see white sparks dancing in her eyes.

"So... you can either become his soldier, his servant, his plaything, or die. But that is... your own choice. No one is forcing anyone to do anything. Of course."

Effie grinned.

"Smart girl. You get it."

Changing Star looked down, her indifferent face turning hard and cold. Her fists were clenched so hard that they seemed bloodless.

"So why hasn't anyone... killed him yet?"

The huntress laughed.

"Kill Gunlaug? Oh, many have tried. Great people, terrible people, and everyone in-between. You can see their skulls above the castle gate, actually."

She shook her head.

"I like your train of thought, princess, but you should forget it. Just consider him to be immortal. He practically is. Believe me when I say that no Sleeper can defeat Gunalug, ever. It's simply impossible."

Effie sighed.

"Plus, no matter how much I hate the bastard, he is the only thing that holds this place together. Despicable as he is, without him, we would have all been dead already."

Sunny watched Nephis, waiting to see her reaction. What he saw did not make him happy at all.

On her beautiful ivory face, there was nothing but cold indifference and resolve.

It was the same expression he had seen on it before the battle with the carapace centurion first, and the Carapace Demon later. Without even needing Cassie's prothetic Ability, he could easily imagine what was going on in her head.

'This is... going to become a problem.'

As though sensing the same thing, Effie grimaced.

"No, seriously. Trying to go against Gunlaugh will only get you killed... if you're lucky. Don't even think about that. Thinking too much is not good for your health here in the Dark City, anyway."

Then, she smiled and gestured to the fire.

"Just have some of this delicious meat instead. Life is good when your stomach is full, right? Let me tell you, this is most likely your last chance to eat anything for free. Food is a real rarity in these parts. Can you believe it?"

Sunny sighed, then leaned forward and picked up a sizzling piece of meat.

No matter what happened, they had to keep going. One step at a time. This was the only way to survive.

"Of course I can believe it. I'm from the outskirts, you know. I didn't even know what real meat smells like before entering the Academy!"

With that, he handed the piece of meat to Cassie, took another one, and began devouring it greedily.

Nephis lingered for a bit, but then followed his example.

Effie giggled.

"That's the spirit! See, doofus gets it."

It seemed as though Changing Star had listened to her advice. At least on the surface, she had accepted that defeating the current master of the castle was impossible.

But Sunny knew that, deep down inside, she remained unconvinced.

After all, Nephis was in the habit of making impossible things happen.

Chapter 129: Solace | Shadow Slave

After the shocking revelation about the cruel futility of their long and arduous journey to the Dark City, the desire to reach the promised castle that kept the three of them going for so long had diminished significantly. However, they still wanted to get there as soon as possible. There was a tiny remnant of hope still burning in Sunny's heart. Perhaps... perhaps Effie was lying to them, or wrong about everything.

Somehow.

He didn't really believe it, though. The beautiful huntress seemed sincere and competent, if a little eccentric. More than that, her words made too much sense.

But Effie wasn't in a rush to leave the granite tower.

"There's not enough daylight left to traverse that much distance. Moving through the ruins is a slow ordeal. Get comfortable and rest. We'll leave tomorrow at dawn."

After that, she got busy dressing down the monster carcasses with a long knife that appeared in her hand. She even summoned a Memory that looked like a leather apron to avoid getting blood on her tunic. Whistling an upbeat melody under her nose, the vigorous young woman looked like an enthusiastic gourmet chef.

Nephis, Sunny and Cassie were in no mood to talk. Each of them sat somberly by themselves, trying to digest the awful reality of their new situation.

Sunny was utterly disheartened.

He felt as though someone had pulled the batteries out of his body, leaving him with no strength or desire to do anything. The world had become dim and tiresome.

'That's hope for you.'

He didn't even have enough motivation to get angry. It was as though... as though he had run an exhausting marathon and crossed the finish line, only to find out that there was another race waiting for him on the other side.

In fact, he would have to keep running forever.

He would never meet Master Jet and Teacher Julius again to thank them for the advice and teachings that had helped him survive, and maybe even repay their kindness. He would never become an Awakened and learn more mysteries of his strange Aspect. Most importantly, his dreams of becoming rich and spending the rest of his life in comfort were also not meant to be.

Which hurt the most.

'Figures.'

Crestfallen, he made an effort to find some semblance of solace in this disastrous fiasco.

'Well... if you think about it... I'm still alive. That has to be worth something, right?'

His shadow glanced at him, not entirely convinced.

"Plus, I can easily stay alive for the foreseeable future. Yeah, the big picture changed for the worst, but our immediate situation has actually improved a lot. We are safe from the constant threat of drowning or being devoured by the dwellers of the deep dark sea. We have also found a strong community of humans."

No matter how things were run in the castle, there were hundreds of people living there. Numbers and experience meant everything in the Dream Realm. By becoming a part of a human collective, they were going to shed most of the burdens that had been silently crushing them all this time. Compared to the infernal gauntlet of the Labyrinth, life in the castle was going to be like a dream.

If they were willing to submit to its thug of a master, of course. If Sunny was alone, he probably would. Now, however...

But even if they were to refuse, there was still the outer settlement. Effie seemed to be doing just fine as an independent hunter. She didn't even seem miserable.

'In fact, she might just be the most contented person I've ever seen. Seriously, how can she be so laidback and cheerful? Is she insane?'

He cast a sidelong glance at the unreasonably tall huntress and frowned.

'Well, let's ponder about it. She has a roof over her head and a limitless supply of delicious food, provided that she hunts it down herself. That is already better than my life in the outskirts.'

Come to think about it, remaining in the Dark City for the rest of his life was not how he had envisioned his future, but it was not that different from struggling to survive in the slums of the real world. Actually, in a lot of senses, it was way better. So, maybe, the situation seemed to be so bad not because it actually was, but because it simply didn't fit his inflated expectations.

Perhaps Effie didn't expect anything from life at all, and that's why she was so damn happy and lively even in the middle of this odious hell.

'Yeah... that must be it. Problem solved. Easy.'

The shadow shook its head and turned away. Sunny sighed. Despite his somewhat rational attempt to find the bright side in this calamity, he didn't feel any better, at all. In fact, thinking about how inescapable and bleak their future was only made him more tired.

Suddenly, his skin crawled. The familiar sensation of dread and unease flooded his mind, only now, it was so much more profound and invasive.

The shadow of the Crimson Spire had fallen on the Dark City.

...Soon, the sound of waves crashing against stone informed them of the coming of night. Not in the mood to even stand up, Sunny silently sent his shadow to take a look outside.

As the last rays of the falling sun colored the world in the shades of red, the cursed sea was surging out of the great crater. Sunny watched as the distant statue of the beautiful faceless woman was slowly drowned by the darkness, until only her open hand remained above the waves. Then, he shifted his gaze and looked down.

The undulating black surface of the cursed sea stopped mere meters beneath the edge of the granite wall. It seemed as though he could almost touch it with his hand. On the other side of the stone barrier, the ruined city lay submerged in shadows, dozens of meters below the water level.

Trapped between the endless expanse of the dark sea and the vast emptiness of the ruins, the mighty wall seemed to be as thin as a sheet of paper. And yet, it silently withstood the crushing pressure of the black waves, serving as a dam that protected the city below from being erased by the terrible flood... just like it did for thousands of years.

However, Sunny couldn't help but imagine all that crushing weight bursting through the collapsing wall in an all-consuming torrent of darkness. He felt shivers running down his spine.

Commanding his shadow to return, Sunny finally forced himself to stand up and walked over to Nephis.

Changing Star was sitting with her back against the wall, a dark expression on her face. Hearing his footsteps, she raised her eyes.

Sunny sat down beside her, lingered for a while, and then said:

"What do you think?"

She was silent for a long time, simply looking at him with an inexorable expression. Just when he was about to think that there would be no answer, Neph finally spoke.

As she did, white sparks ignited in the depths of her cold grey eyes.

"We will find a way to return. No matter what has to be done, we will."

Her words echoed inside the granite tower, making shadows on the walls dance in sinister glee.

Chapter 130: Strength Of A Dozen Men

In the morning, they set out for the castle.

Before leaving the safe haven of the granite tower, Effie gave them a list of instructions:

"Follow behind me. Listen to everything I say. Don't make any noise. Don't bleed. Don't think too much. Some of the creatures out there can hear noisy thoughts, others can sense strong emotions. So don't feel fear, either."

Sunny stared at her with a grim expression. How was he supposed to control what he feels?

The vigorous huntress grinned.

"What? You never tried to solve math equations in your head to impress a lovely lady? Just do the same."

As Sunny's cheeks began to turn bright red, she giggled and turned to Cassie and Neph:

"Correction. The two of you, try not to feel fear. Doofus, you try not to get too excited. If walking behind me turns out to be too much, ask to get slapped, alright?"

Sunny scowled and uttered through gritted teeth:

"That... won't be a problem."

Effie blinked a couple of times, then smiled.

"Ah! Playing for the other team? I see, I see..."

What... what was that supposed to mean?!

Trying to get his emotions under control, Sunny took a deep breath and counted to ten.

'Math equations my ass... who does she think she is?! Wait... why am I counting?'

Making sure that they understood her instructions, the huntress turned around and rolled the massive slab of granite that blocked the exit from the tower to the side. Lean muscles tensed and moved under her olive skin, making for a picturesque view.

Sunny stared at her back and gulped. That slab of granite had to weigh a couple of tons, at least. How strong was the beautiful giantess, exactly?

Catching a glimpse of his stare, Effie raised an eyebrow and winked.

"Like what you see?"

He answered on autopilot:

"Yes... huh... wait, no! I mean, that's not why I was looking. How are you that strong?"

She glanced at the granite slab, then at him.

"Oh, that. That's my Aspect Ability. It's a strong all-around physical enhancement."

That was... a very rare and powerful Ability to have. While not as flashy as many others, it was practically the ultimate warrior Ability. With not only her strength but also her speed, agility, endurance and resilience boosted, Effie was like one of those ancient heroes Neph sometimes talked about. Especially since that boost seemed to be so extravagant.

Plus, she had most likely absorbed a very large amount of soul essence over the years of hunting monsters in the Dark City. All those shards the recalcitrant huntress refused to pay as tribute to the tyrannical lord of the castle had to go somewhere.

But why would she just admit what her Ability was? Sharing secrets like that was not a wise thing to do, especially not in the ruthless reality of the Forgotten Shore.

Noticing his surprise, Effie grinned.

"What? It's not like it's a great mystery. Around here, anyone with a pair of eyes knows what my Ability can do. Do you want me to tell you what my Flaw is as well?"

There was a mischievous glint in her eyes.

'Yeah, right. As if anyone is insane enough to share their...'

"It's very simple! My Aspect not only enhances all my physical attributes, it also does the same with all my physical needs. Why do you think I ate enough meat to create a literal pile of gnawed bones, for the fun of it?"

She laughed and shook her head.

"Well, it was fun, not gonna lie..."

So the price for having the strength of many men was to have the hunger of many men, as well. Out here in the Dark City, where food was scarce and hard to come by, it was a dangerous Flaw to possess. It was a curse that could force a person to hunt more, and therefore risk injury and death more than anyone else would have to.

Most people would scoff at its severity, but not Sunny. He knew what hunger, real hunger, felt like. What it could do to a person.

Perhaps that was the reason why Effie was out here in the first place. Perhaps she had become a huntress not because she wanted to, but because she simply didn't have a choice.

'What other physical needs do people have?' Sunny thought, a little confused. "Air, then water and food, then... uh... huh?"

"Hey! I said not to get excited!"

Sunny flinched and looked up at Effie, who was staring at him and cackling. Embarrassed, he gritted his teeth in anger.

'Don't flatter yourself, beanpole!'

However, when he noticed that Nephis and Cassie were observing them with amusement clearly written on their faces, his anger somewhat subsided. Belatedly, Sunny realized that, perhaps, the experienced huntress had been joking around with him not just out of pure mischief.

Perhaps she was trying to lighten the mood to get them into the right mental state, thus making traversing the cursed city less perilous.

Meanwhile, Effie grinned.

"What? No answer?"

Sunny glared at her and said:

"Don't distract me."

Then he forcefully changed the flow of his thoughts and reluctantly added:

"I'm solving equations..."

A minute later, they left the granite tower and stepped onto the streets of the Dark City.

Effie had summoned the helmet of her archaic armor before venturing forth. It was of the Corinthian design, with a tall crest of blue horsehair and a narrow visor that left only her eyes and lips exposed.

On her back, there was a leather bag containing the meat, bones, and hides of the monsters she had slain during the hunt. Sunny knew for a fact that this bag was much larger on the inside than it seemed from the outside — otherwise, in order to accommodate all of Effe's trophies, it would have had

to be comically big. However, it still weighed way too much for an ordinary person to carry.

Including the armor, the long knife, and the black leather apron, it was the fourth Memory he had seen the huntress summon. He wondered how many more did she have in her arsenal.

He had yet to see what weapons Effie used.

In the ghostly light of early dawn, they entered the cursed ruins.

Chapter 131: Traversing The Dark City

The mournful ruins of the once-great city sprawled around them like a desolate stone maze. With grey skies above and nothing but dead silence surrounding the cohort of four tense Sleepers, it seemed as though they were walking through a vast, cyclopean graveyard.

Sunny had to constantly remind himself that there were countless horrors hiding in the ominous shadows of the Dark City. One wrong turn could land them in dire peril. In this ancient ruin, they had no choice but to entrust their lives to the hands of their guide.

Luckily, the guide in question was not a morose dead poet, but a tall, extremely attractive young woman clad in a pleasantly revealing archaic armor. In their current circumstances, Sunny much preferred the company of a warrior to that of a useless scribbler.

In fact, circumstances had nothing to do with it. He was having trouble imagining any situation where a writer would be helpful to have around. From what he knew, all writers were lazy, talentless hacks whose only real skill was finagling money out of honest people while getting off on torturing them with sadistic cliffhangers.

Not to mention that none of them had a backside like Effie... uh... wait, what?

Getting his mind out of the gutter, Sunny frowned and reminded himself to keep his emotions in check.

In a sense, this harsh necessity was a blessing. The perilous reality of the ruined city prevented them from concentrating on the bitter despair that had taken a stranglehold on their hearts after the grim revelation of the previous day.

They just had to put one foot in front of the other and not think too much about anything.

One step at a time. That was how he was going to survive.

With a heavy sigh, Sunny glanced around and continued walking.

Just like Effie had said, traversing the ruins turned out to be a slow ordeal. The huntress lead them through the complex maze of wide and narrow streets following a strange, convoluted path that only she knew. Often, they would have to stop and hide, waiting for some unseen danger to pass.

Sometimes they walked under the empty sky, sometimes they dove into the weathered buildings and spent some time crawling through the piles of rubble inside. Other times, Effie was able to lead them straight through half-collapsed houses to emerge into secluded alleyways on the other side.

Once or twice, they had even climbed to the rooftops and proceeded forward by walking on precariously rickety tiles or bared support beams, jumping across vast chasms and balancing on half-rotten planks of wood that had been placed there by someone to bridge especially wide gaps. During these moments, either Neph or Sunny would carry Cassie in their arms.

Sunny was surprised to discover that the interiors of some buildings were incredibly well-preserved. It was as though the inhabitants had just left a few days ago, as opposed to the thousands of years that had passed in reality. Because of that, he was able to catch glimpses of how the citizens of this ancient city had lived all that time ago.

It was a strange and eerie sight.

He was also able to clearly understand that Effie indeed knew the ruins very well. Everywhere they went, there were signs of her previous visits and preparations. From the planks placed across the gaps between roofs to the heavy slabs of stone used to hide improvised passages, it was apparent that she had spent years of meticulous effort turning large parts of this lethal maze into her own private hunting grounds.

He had gained a new respect for the seemingly carefree young woman. She almost made traveling through the cursed ruins look safe and easy.

However, he knew that this couldn't be farther from the truth. In fact, he suspected that death was constantly breathing down their necks, only barely held at bay by Effie's knowledge and timely judgment. Several freshly eviscerated carcasses that they had stumbled on served as a clear sign that Dark City was teeming with harrowing life.

Even terrifying Nightmare Creatures were not safe here.

More than once, they heard the distant sounds of claws scraping against stone, sensed the ground trembling under heavy footsteps, or noticed swift shadows falling through the clouds. In those moments, Effie would change their course on the fly or find a perfectly concealed hiding spot without fail.

Meeting her had indeed been a rare stroke of luck.

But with each hour that passed, Sunny grew increasingly somber. No matter what kind of future awaited them in this cursed place, he had no doubt that they would have to hunt for food as well. That meant that he was going to have to learn all the same things that Effie had learned, and maybe even more. The task seemed incredibly daunting. He wasn't even sure that he would be able to accomplish it.

At least he wasn't going to do it by himself. There was Changing Star to partner with, and Cassie. Their presence calmed him down.

Living in this terrible hell alone... he didn't even want to think about it. Such a wretched existence would surely kill him, and if not, at least drive him insane. At that point, he wouldn't wish to be alive anyway. Who would want to endure that kind of misery?

'Why think about something that is never going to happen?'

Glancing at Nephis and Cassie, Sunny hid a smile and hurried to catch up to Effie.

Come to think about it, he had it way better than the recalcitrant huntress. There were reliable allies with whom he had forged bonds of trust and companionship at his side. The three of them made each other stronger.

More than that, his own Aspect was able to provide him with a similar comprehensive physical enhancement Ability, albeit a lesser version of it. It was much more versatile, though, allowing him to transfer the enhancement effect onto Memories and inanimate objects, not to mention his invaluable ability to move and scout around without being seen.

Sunny would offer the services of his shadow to Effie, but he wasn't sure about how safe that would be. If there were creatures in these ruins capable of sensing thoughts and emotions, what were the chances that some of them would be able to sense the gaze of the shadow as well? He would have to learn more and experiment before allowing it to wander around on its own.

These thoughts had cheered him up a little.

...Soon, as the sun began to fall toward the horizon, they had finally reached the base of the hill on which stood the magnificent castle.

Sunny looked up, sensing his heart beating wildly. A heavy and anxious feeling took hold of his mind.

Depending on what happened next, their fates were going to change forever... either for the better, or for the worse.

Chapter 132: End Of The Line

In the center of the cursed city, a tall hill towered above the ruins. At its base, an arch made of pristine white marble stood amidst the devastation. It was unscathed and spotless, as though protected from the entropic touch of the all-consuming darkness by some sublime force. Beyond the arch, a wide road paved with white stones scaled the hill.

Sunny looked up as they passed beneath the arch, trying to imagine crowds of festively dressed people doing the same in the distant past. It was hard and a little heartbreaking thinking about how the ancient city must have looked before the mysterious calamity.

Not turning her head, Effie said in a wistful tone:

"There are areas in the ruins that many Nightmare Creatures tend to avoid for some reason. The castle is one of these places. I was told that back when the original group of Sleepers came here hoping to carve a foothold in the city, there was only a single Spire Messenger nesting in the throne room, with no other monsters around. Those madmen actually managed to kill it."

Nephis gave her a glance.

"Spire Messenger?"

The huntress chuckled.

"Big ugly bastards with black feathers and pale bodies, you must have seen them hunting in the Labirynth. They come from the Spire."

Changing Star hesitated.

"What are their rank and class?"

Effie shivered a little.

"Fallen beasts. That's why I said that those guys were a little mad. But they were a powerful bunch."

She grew silent and then added in a quiet voice:

"It must have taken a lot to kill them, in the end."

Brought into a solemn mood by that last statement, they continued forward in silence. The stone road coiled around the hill, slowly climbing its sheer slopes. Here and there, it was broken by long stretches of stairs and formidable, but strangely graceful fortifications. No one was standing guard, though. The whole road was empty.

Sunny gestured to one of the stone barricades and asked:

"Why are there no watchmen?"

Effie shrugged.

"Gunlaug has barely enough people to man the castle walls. They will notice anything that approaches the hill, though. The whole city is in clear view from up there, and there are different protective measures put in place. They have already spotted us, too."

Sunny shifted his body a little, not enjoying the feeling of being watched by some unseen, potentially dangerous strangers.

...After a long time walking up the coiling road of white stone, they finally reached the zenith of the hill and saw the mighty castle in all its glory.

Up close, it looked even more magnificent.

Built from the same pristine marble as the arch at the base of the hill, it stretched into the sky like a white mountain made by human hands. The frontmost tower was wide and imposing, with a tall decorated gate and a grandiose staircase leading down from it to a vast stone platform that the road ended with.

On both sides of the frontmost tower, brought slightly forth, two other stood as bastions, connected to it with arched aerial bridges and accompanied by smaller companion towers of their own. Behind them, the main keep soared even higher, as though trying to challenge the menacing Crimson Spire that loomed above the world far in the distance.

Smaller towers, spires, and wings stood here and there, forming a complex and strangely harmonious formation.

The whole structure was incredibly beautiful, striking, and at the same time radiated a feeling of unassailable firmness. It was as though the castle was built for gods, not mortals.

The only thing that spoiled the picture were dozens of human skulls hanging above the gates on rusty chains.

Sunny grimaced, brought down to grim reality by this ghastly sight.

His gaze fell lower, only now noticing dozens of crude, makeshift hovels huddled on the stone platform. They were built from fragments of rubble, rotting wood and pieces of monster hides, chaotically clinging to the stones as if afraid to be blown away by the wind.

An unpleasant, strangely familiar smell hit him in the nose a few moments later. It was the motley, but unmistakable stench of the slums. That stench was nothing like the poisonous reek of the outskirts, and at the same time exactly the same.

Sunny couldn't help but smile crookedly.

'Gee. I'm home.'

Between the hovels, gaunt and empty-eyed people were busy eking out their pitiful existences. They were dressed in a strange mix of dirty rags and shiny Memories, with those wearing armor standing out among the rest like rare oddities. Most of them were extremely young, barely older than Sunny himself. He could smell their exhaustion and desperation even from where he was standing.

Sunny really wanted to laugh.

After everything he had been through ever since becoming infected by the Nightmare Spell, the cycle had finally completed. He was right back to where he had started, only much worse off.

Wasn't that the funniest thing ever?

If this wasn't fate, then he didn't know what was. Oh, the irony...

Changing Star's voice tore him away from his reverie.

"Sunny? Are you okay?"

He blinked a couple of times, then slowly turned to face her and said after a brief pause:

"Yeah. I was just reminiscing."

Something in his voice must have sounded strange, because she gave him a long look before turning away with a short nod.

"Good. Don't relax just yet."

Then, she turned to Effie and asked:

"What do we do now?"

The huntress looked around and shrugged.

"It's going to get dark soon, so I would advise you to find a shelter before that. Look around for an empty hut. With how many people die each season, there's always plenty of those. Otherwise, two of you can pay the tribute and go into the castle. But the third one will have to stay."

Changing Star lingered, then said:

"What about you?"

Effie grinned.

"What about me? That luxury one-bedroom cottage over there is mine. Mind you, it was built from the best kind of crap you can find here... although it's still crap. Anyway, I am going home, preparing myself a hearty supper and then going to sleep. I'm dead tired from these last couple of days. Sorry, I don't host guests."

Nephis stared at her, obviously wanting to say more, but then simply nodded.

"I see. Thank you for everything you have done for us. I won't forget it."

Effie smiled, patted her on the shoulder and turned to Sunny and Cassie.

"Bye, doofus. Bue, doll. See you around."

With that, she began whistling a cheerful melody and walked away.

The three of them were suddenly left alone, lost and unsure about what to do. The inhabitants of the outer settlement didn't pay them a lot of attention, only occasionally throwing an indifferent glance at the three young strangers. Only Cassie's beauty attracted a couple of intense, darkly fascinated gazes.

After a minute or so passed in disoriented silence, Changing Star hesitantly took out the two soul shards that they had collected from the remains of the Rolling Stone and looked at the glimmering crystals lying in her hand.

They had to make a decision.

Chapter 133: Farewell | Shadow Slave

Nephis held the shimmering crystals, looking at them with a heavy expression. Sunny was also staring at the shards, his head full of dark thoughts.

The remnants of shattered souls glowed softly in the dim twilight of dusk.

Around them, the inhabitants of the outer settlement were hurrying to get inside their pitiful hovels before the coming of night. The sun was already hidden behind the cyclopean silhouette of the Crimson Spire, drowning the world in its eerie shadow. The air was full of fear and worry.

He grimaced.

"What are you thinking about?"

Changing Star sighed and looked up. Her ivory face was harsh and thoughtful. She remained silent for a while, and then said in her usual calm tone:

"We need to split up."

Sunny couldn't help but laugh.

"You do know what usually happens when people split up in these kinds of situations, right?"

She stared at him with no humor in her cold, grey eyes.

"This is not a drama, Sunny. We have the means to provide two of us with food and shelter for a week. There's no reason to pass on this opportunity."

Cassie turned to her, a confused expression on her face.

"But... but what about the third?"

An uncomfortable silence hung between them, broken only by the whistling wind. Sunny looked at the blind girl, then at Nephis, and finally glanced at himself. Which one of them was going to remain hungry in the bitter cold while the other two would be eating their fill in the comfortable safety of the castle?

He thought that he had an inkling.

'What else did I expect?'

It was less than ten minutes since they reached the human civilization — well, whatever passed for one in this loathsome purgatory — and the tentative connection that had been established between them in the crucible of the Labyrinth was already coming apart at the seams.

Just as he had expected, the nature of their relationship was going to change now that they weren't essentially the last three people in the whole wide world, with no one else to rely on but each other. Was it strong enough to endure without that desperate need? He wasn't sure.

Throughout his whole life, Sunny had never managed to last long in any group. He didn't know if this time was going to be any different.

Just as his insecurity threatened to break out of control, Nephis sighed and handed him the soul shards.

"Here. Take Cassie inside."

He stared at her hand, then looked up sharply.

A strange storm of emotions erupted in his heart. There was surprise, joy, concern... but at the same time, irrationally, a dark sense of shame and resentment. Not knowing how to deal with all these feelings, he scowled and asked:

"Why me?"

Changing Star simply raised an eyebrow. Shaking his head, Sunny offered her a crooked smile and added:

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not refusing. I'm just curious why are you so kind all of a sudden. Is it out of some misguided sense of nobility?"

Nephis looked at him for a while, and then said with indifference:

"I have never been noble. I have never been kind."

He blinked, struggling with the desire to pinch Neph and make sure that she was awake. Had she met herself? If she wasn't noble, then who was?

Meanwhile, Changing Star shrugged and looked away.

"It is simply the best choice. Right now, we need information the most. With the help of the shadow, you will be able to learn much more about what is going on in the castle than I ever would. While you are gathering information inside, I will do the same here. We will meet in a week, share our findings, and decide what to do next."

Sunny just stared at her. Did Neph just... reveal herself to be as cynically pragmatical as he was? Once again, he felt a weird mix of emotions. He was simultaneously elated and hurt by her lack of sentiment.

However, the fact that she simply assumed that they were going to continue working together, as though it was a given, had not avoided his attention. For some reason, this small detail gave Sunny a warm feeling.

Nephis looked at him and added:

"Besides, the terms of our trade have come to an end. Your promise was to give up on your share of spoils on the way to the castle. Well, here we are. That stone creature was your kill, so these shards are yours by right."

'Trade? What trade?'

Oh, yeah... the trade he had made with Changing Star to get her to teach him swordsmanship and hide the fact that he had no way to absorb soul shards. He has almost forgotten about it.

But she didn't.

Now that Sunny had been reminded of its existence and realized that it was over, he felt a sudden pang of regret. It was as though one of the few strings that connected them together had been suddenly severed.

With a sigh, he took the soul shards from her hand and gripped them tightly.

"Alright. Then... I'll meet you in a week, I guess."

Sunny opened his mouth, wishing to say something else, but then just turned away. Stepping aside, he gave the girls some privacy to say their goodbyes. Soon, Cassie's delicate hand found his shoulder.

Sunny glanced at the blind girl, remained silent for a bit, and then asked:

"Are you ready?"

She hesitated before answering. When she did, there was a hint of sadness in her voice:

"Yes."

With that, they walked away and left Nephis behind, standing alone in the surging darkness of the descending night.

Guiding the blind girl, Sunny approached the grand stairs that led to the ornate gates of the magnificent marble castle. Out here, there was nothing but the howling of the wind and the encroaching veil of darkness. It seemed as though the dwellers of the slum were not allowed to build their hovels on the wide stretch of stone that separated the marble steps from the outer settlement.

"Be careful, there are steps ahead."

After warning Cassie, he sensed a cold feeling grasp his heart. For some reason, it felt as though once he stepped on these stairs, there would be no way back.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny took a step forward and began his ascent to the castle.

Soon, they approached the apex and stopped in front of a couple of unfriendly guards.

Both of the young men barring their way wore armor-type Memories and wielded their weapons in the open, as though trying to warn anyone approaching to not test their patience. They looked at Sunny without even trying to hide their disdain.

"What do you want, rat?"

Sunny hesitated, then held out the soul shards.

One of the guards glanced at them and grinned.

"Well, would you look at that. The rat has brought us a present."

Chuckling, he took the glimmering crystals and waved a hand.

"Come on in. Someone will meet you inside."

Struggling to not glare at the armed Sleepers with murder in his eyes, Sunny forced out a pale smile and cautiously walked past them.

Then, looking up at the dozens of human skulls swinging above them on rusty chains, he sighed darkly and led Cassie through the gates of the castle.

Chapter 134: Bright Castle | Shadow Slave

As they passed through the ornate gates, a large hall opened up before them. Hearing a strange rustle from above, Sunny raised his head and saw tall windows with stained glass panes soaring to the distant ceiling. During the day, the hall must have been filled with cascading rays of beautiful light.

Currently, though, several young women were nimbly moving from one window to another, draping them with thick sheets of crude fabric. The makeshift wooden ladders they used creaked and cracked, creating a strange and almost melodic sound.

It seemed as though the sheets of fabric were being fastened in a way that prevented even the smallest glint of light from escaping the castle during the night. Sunny suspected that every window in the marble fortress was currently being covered in the same way.

Just as this thought appeared in his mind, a loud noise thundered behind their backs. Turning around, he saw the ornate gates closing. The two guards who had met them outside were already sliding a heavy iron bolt into the sockets, their faces red from strain. The massive bar must have weighed more than the two of them combined.

The castle was now sealed from the outside world, ready to face the onslaught of cursed darkness.

Suddenly, Sunny felt like an animal caught in a cage.

Trying to calm himself down, he looked around and noticed an opulent wooden desk that looked completely out of place in the grand hall. It must have been dragged here from some other part of the marble citadel. Behind the desk, a gaunt young man with nervous eyes was writing something down on a piece of parchment.

The whole thing looked strangely similar to a reception desk in a luxurious hotel... or, rather, to what Sunny imagined such a thing would look like. He

had never actually been to a hotel, of course.

Hesitating for a few moments, he walked over to the desk and addressed the young man:

"Hey. Uh... we've been told that someone will meet us inside."

The castle receptionist flinched and looked up from his paper, a fearful expression appearing on his face. When he realized who was speaking to him, though, the fear disappeared, replaced by a tentative smile.

The young man had a thin face and a pale, unhealthy complexion. He looked hungry and weak, much more like those poor souls in the outer settlement than someone who lived in the castle. His clothes, however, were clean and tidy, without any signs of wear and tear like that of the people outside.

"Ah, guests! Sorry, you gave me a fright there. Welcome, welcome to the Bright Castle. Whoah, you were just in time. A couple of minutes later, and the gates would have been closed."

Saying that, he threw a tense glance at the two guards and then quickly looked away.

"Anyway, my name is Harper. I'm responsible for guest accommodations today. Let's get you... oh! I don't seem to recognize you guys. Is this your first time paying the tribute?"

Sunny stared at him for a couple of seconds, feeling Cassie squeeze his shoulder a little tighter, then said:

"Yes."

Harper smiled.

"Congratulations! You might not even suspect it, but I was once in your shoes myself. In fact, it was just a few months ago. But ever since Lord Gunlaug graced me with his kindness, I've been living in the safety of the castle. You'll love it here too, I'm sure."

'...Right.'

Sunny didn't know if the young man was sincere in his gratitude to the local tyrant or was simply saying these things for the guards to hear, and honestly, he didn't care.

What piqued his interest, though, was that Harper did not seem as surprised by the timing of their arrival into the Dark City as Effie had been. But then he realized that people living in the castle might not have known who came to the outer settlement and when.

They would probably assume that he and Cassie had entered the Dream Realm close to the ruins and then spent the last two months scrounging for soul shards to pay their way into the castle. This was a good detail to know, since Sunny didn't want to announce the true extent of their competence just yet.

Judging by how impressed Effie was by the fact that they had managed to carve their way through the Labyrinth, this would attract a lot of unnecessary attention.

He smiled with the corner of his mouth.

"So, what do we need to do now?"

Harper picked up his quill and opened a large ledger.

"That's very simple, really. I'll just need your names to mark when the two of you paid the tribute, and that's pretty much it. We have a lot of spare rooms here, especially in the Tower of Dusk. It is very quiet, so how about I settle you there?"

There was a nervous glint in his eyes.

'Tower of Dusk... probably means that it's in the western part of the castle, facing the Crimson Spire. No wonder people don't want to live there.'

But to Sunny, fewer people meant less danger. He gave the gaunt young man a nod.

"Sure. No problem."

Harper smiled.

"Great! That's great! Uh, so your names..."

Sunny interrupted him, trying to avoid dangerous questions:

"I'm Sunless, and this is Cassia."

The young man wrote their names down and marked the date of their arrival. Sunny stared at his neat handwriting, his eyes locked on the short strings of numbers.

So... it had actually been exactly seventy-seven days since the night they had arrived on the Forgotten Shore. The three of them had scrupulously kept track of time for a while, but after their harrowing experience with the Soul Devourer, Sunny had lost the grasp on the actual count.

Out there in the real world, the spring was already starting. A whole season had passed.

...It felt like a lifetime.

Not paying any attention to the storm raging inside Sunny's heart, Harper closed the ledger and offered them a polite smile.

"All done. Now, leave your worries behind and follow me. Between these walls, you are completely safe. Nothing is going to hurt you!"

His tone was jovial, but Sunny didn't miss the quick glance Harper threw at the menacing guards standing silently by the sealed gate.

Chapter 135: Cohabitation | Shadow Slave

Harper led them through the castle, explaining small details about the rules and customs one had to follow once inside. He was a talkative and friendly guy, so Sunny quickly got the gist of it.

In general, it was very simple. They were free to do whatever they wanted unless it broke the basic rules of cohabitation, with a few small caveats. There were areas in the marble fortress open to everyone, and areas that only members of Gunlaug's host could enter. Those were marked by the symbol of a serpent coiled around a tall tower.

As they walked, Sunny noticed several crude tapestries with that symbol woven on them. The cloth of the tapestries was black, with a stylized white tower and a golden serpent embroidered in their center. He guessed that this represented the Dark City, the Bright Castle, and its lord respectively.

Apart from that, there wasn't much to know except for when and where to find food, water, and other necessities. The last thing Harper said was about how they should behave around other inhabitants of the fortress:

"People here are very nice, but you still must remember to have manners. Especially when you are interacting with the guards and the hunters. These guys protect us and risk their lives to provide for us, so they deserve our respect. If one of them... uh... if there's a misunderstanding, be mindful of their burdens. Yes."

Sunny threw a dark glance at the gaunt young man and translated that statement to "don't mess with Gunlaug's people, and if they are messing with you, just swallow it."

How wonderful.

Meanwhile, he was able to catch a few glimpses of how people actually lived inside the castle. To Sunny's surprise, they didn't seem nearly as put

down and miserable as he had expected. In fact, everyone seemed to be more or less fine, going about their business with mundane casualness.

Of course, there were signs of worry, stress and pressure on their faces, but the same could be said about people in the real world. All in all, the inhabitants of the castle looked surprisingly... ordinary.

'I guess humans can adapt to anything.'

And as Changing Star had taught him, adaptability was the greatest strength.

As long as there was some semblance of stability, humans would find a way. And it seemed as though the tyrannical master of the ancient fortress, hateful as he was, was providing the Sleepers trapped on the Forgotten Shore with that stability. Effie's words about how the bastard was the only thing holding this place together echoed in Sunny's mind.

'Perhaps he's a... necessary evil?'

Finally, they reached the westernmost tower of the castle. Indeed, it was mostly empty and quiet. Few people seemed to want to stay here, driven away by the unnerving vision of the Crimson Spire looming in the distance.

However, for the two of them, it was perfect. Cassie couldn't see at all, while Sunny was long accustomed to the presence of the Spire because of his sensitivity to shadows. Plus, right now, all the windows in the tower were closed, hiding it from sight.

Harper suddenly stopped and said in a somewhat embarrassed tone:

"Uh... I forgot to ask. Would you guys be needing one room or two?"

Without thinking too much, Sunny and Cassie answered at the same time:

"One."

"Two."

Then, they froze and turned to each other with petrified expressions. Cassie blushed, while Sunny became even paler.

He didn't mean anything untoward by requesting a single room for the two of them. It's just that over the months spent camping together, being close to Cassie in case she needed help with something had become his habit. More importantly, he was unwilling to let her leave his sight even for a second in this unpredictable castle. He didn't trust anyone here.

But in these new circumstances, requesting a single room suggested a different meaning.

But there wasn't!

Clearing his throat, Sunny looked at Harper and said:

"Two rooms if they're next to each other. If that is not possible, then one."

The skittish young man scratched the back of his head, and then answered in a somewhat surprised tone:

"Uh... alright. I think I can find two adjacent rooms for you. Follow me."

With that, he began walking forward.

Sunny glanced at Cassy, then shook his head and followed behind Harper.

'She won't misunderstand. Right?'

Soon, they were standing in front of two sturdy wooden doors. Harper handed Sunny two iron keys and smiled.

"Here we are. The rooms are not very big, but they're really... uh... cozy. Enjoy your first night of safety, guys! You must have not felt safe in a long time. I know I never did before entering the castle. Thank heavens that time is behind me! Anyway, food will be served one hour after sunrise tomorrow, in the main hall of the Keep. See you there!"

With that, he glanced at them one last time, smiled sheepishly, and walked away.

Sunny and Cassie were left alone in awkward silence.

Still feeling a little embarrassed, Sunny sighed and said:

"I hope you didn't think that I was..."

Cassie suddenly giggled.

"I know. I just didn't expect it. Let me guess, you distrust every single person in this castle, and therefore are going to watch me like a hawk to scare them all away. Like an overprotective, mean, violent big brother. Right?"

With a smile, she turned her head this way and another, and then added:

"To be honest, I don't feel safe here either. So, thank you! Although I must say, this place seems almost like a hotel. My parents took me on a mountain vacation once, and we stayed at a really old hotel. Uh, what was it called... Overgaze? Overlook? Anyway, this place is exactly like that."

Sunny grinned.

"Right? I've never been to a hotel, but that was my first thought as well."

Of course, that was if the hotel in question was populated by hundreds of Nightmare Spell carriers, with a murderous tyrant for an owner, and not a single police officer around to call for help if something happened.

'Huh. Funny...'

Sunny had spent most of his life scared of the policemen and trying to avoid them at all costs.

But now, he actually missed them a lot.

Chapter 136: Reflection | Shadow Slave

On the other side of the sturdy door, there was a tiny room with stone walls and a single, narrow window that was closed with wooden shutters and draped in thick cloth. Harper had warned them not to open the windows during the night, but out here in the Tower of Dusk, no one would want to stare at the view anyway.

Allowing any amount of light to seep out of the castle at night was considered to be a severe crime, so he had been pretty emphatic on that point. Of course, the gaunt young man didn't know that neither Sunny nor Cassie required light to move in the dark. They could open the windows as wide as they wanted... not that they had any reason to.

Inside the room, there was a bed with a straw mattress, a flimsy chest, and a tiny desk. On the desk, there was a basin filled with water, a few strips of clean cloth and an oil lamp.

There was even a small round mirror made of polished bronze.

Sunny caught a glimpse of his reflection and flinched, as though seeing a stranger.

In these past two months, he had seen himself through the eyes of the shadow plenty of times, but it wasn't the same.

He had changed a lot.

His face was much sharper and angular now, the last remnants of youthful roundness chased away from it by the harsh gauntlet of the Labyrinth... although Sunny never had a lot of that, to begin with. It was thin and pale, with dark circles under his eyes and other signs of extreme exhaustion. His black hair was longer, falling over his eyes in a dirty mess.

What changed the most, however, were the eyes themselves. Deep in their dark depths, there was a glint of calm, heavy, bleak coldness that had not been there before.

With a startling realization, Sunny understood that he, too, now possessed the look of a seasoned fighter. The type of calculating coldness hiding in the eyes of such men was known as the "murder math" in the outskirts.

Hero and Nephis had that quality, too. Only in their case, it made them seem like true warriors.

Sunny, on the other hand... Sunny had the eyes of a killer.

And even deeper than that, visible only to him, golden threads of Weaver's inhuman legacy glowed mysteriously in the darkness.

Staring at his reflection, Sunny grinned darkly and said in a strange, hoarse voice:

"...Looking good, Sunless."

Leaving his shadow to guard the door to Cassie's room, Sunny fell on the soft mattress, wrapped himself in a blanket, and tried to get himself to sleep.

Here in the safety of the mighty castle, surrounded by hundreds of people, lying on a real bed, it was hard to believe that just a few days ago he was traveling through the cursed darkness of the deadly sea on a rickety boat, fighting terrifying monsters in the bizarre landscape of the coral labyrinth, and losing his mind piece by piece to the gluttonous hunger of an ancient soul-devouring tree.

It all seemed like a feverish dream.

'This... isn't bad.'

With that thought, he fell asleep.

In the morning, washed and refreshed, he waited for Cassie in the hallway. Even the Puppeteer's Shroud, which finally got a chance to return to the

Soul Sea for a decently long period of time and restore itself, looked clean and tidy once again.

That poor armor had gone through enough abuse to kill a dozen Sleepers, yet it still held fast, saving his life on numerous occasions. Sunny was reminded of how lucky he had been to receive it.

The blind girl did not make him wait for long. Soon, she came out of her room, practically glowing with loveliness and freshness. It seemed as though Cassie had done the same things as Sunny,

After months spent crawling through blood and dirt in the wilderness, they finally looked and felt like humans again.

"Good morning!"

Sunny blinked.

He had almost forgotten how stunning Cassie was. With her delicate features, bright blue eyes and pale blond hair, she looked like a beautiful porcelain doll. The blind girl had dismissed the enchanted cloak, leaving her dressed only in a light tunic, with leather sandals on her feet. She was nothing short of breathtaking.

He closed his eyes and sighed.

'This... smells like trouble.'

"Good morning, Cassie."

She turned her head to him and wrinkled her nose. Sunny frowned:

"Uh... what?"

The blind girl knitted her brow.

"I don't know. You smell different."

He stared at her for a few moments, and then laughed.

"If this is your way of saying that I used to reek, then thank you, I guess."

Giggling, Cassie came closer and put her hand on his shoulder.

"That's not what I meant! Anyway, let's go eat!"

The two of them were in a strangely good mood.

Sunny guided Cassie to the main keep of the castle, following the route that Harper had explained to them the previous evening. On the way, he was careful to avoid any doors and corridors marked with the symbol of the golden serpent coiled around a white tower.

His shadow was going to take a look at the forbidden areas of the fortress later, most likely. But for now, they had to keep a low profile and avoid trouble.

Finding the Keep was not hard, as many other Sleepers were going there to partake in the breakfast too. Meals were served twice a day in the castle, once in the morning and once right before sunset. If you missed one and had no other way to procure food, you would have to remain hungry for the rest of the day.

Sunny observed the Sleepers with curiosity, sometimes describing them to Cassie in a low voice. The inhabitants of the castle were very different from the desperate dwellers of the outer settlement. They generally seemed healthy, or at least well-fed. The amount of armor-type Memories here was also much higher, although many still wore clothes made of mundane fabrics.

Almost all of them were young and beautiful, with only a couple of the people he had seen looking like they were past their early twenties. Despite that, few could compare to Cassie in terms of looks.

Finally, they entered the main hall of the Keep, where long wooden tables were placed to accommodate the morning crowd of hungry Sleepers.

Suddenly, hundreds of eyes turned to stare at Cassie and Sunny.

Feeling cold shivers running down his spine, he gulped.

'Crap.'

Chapter 137: All Eyes On Me

The main hall of the mighty castle was grandiose and majestic in appearance. The gentle light of the morning sun was cascading through the tall windows and reflecting from the white marble walls, filling it with a bright radiance. The walls were decorated with intricate carvings that span dozens of meters, creating a regal tapestry.

At the far end of the hall, a set of stairs led to a dark alcove. The back wall of the alcove had numerous small holes cut through it, and with sunlight shining through them into the deep darkness, it seemed as though a fragment of the starlit night sky was somehow locked within the castle.

Beneath that light stood an empty white throne.

Sunny stared at the throne for a few moments, then lowered his gaze and glanced at the several hundred people that were looking at them.

Long wooden tables were placed along the length of the grand hall, with a motley crowd of Sleepers sitting on crude benches behind them, busy consuming their food. There was some sort of hierarchy in how they were grouped, but Sunny couldn't understand it yet.

Currently, most of them were staring in his direction.

Sunny gulped.

It took him a couple of seconds to realize that all these people were not, in fact, looking at him. They were all looking at Cassie, clearly startled by her loveliness.

'Crap.'

Just as he had thought, this smelled like trouble.

The blind girl, meanwhile, was oblivious to the commotion her appearance had caused. Sensing the sudden tension in his muscles, she asked:

"Sunny? Why did you stop?"

He narrowed his eyes, gave the crowd of Sleepers his most menacing scowl, and answered in a flat tone:

"Just taking in the view."

Then, Sunny walked over to the young women rationing the food, received two plates of steaming monster meat stew, and guided Cassie to a relatively empty spot at the end of one of the tables. He even got two cups of something that closely resembled tea.

Sitting down, he put the crudely made utensils into Cassie's hand and stared at his plate.

He didn't like all this attention one bit.

"Look at that, Cas! They even got vegetables. I swear there's at least two pieces of a... uh... tomato in my stew. Or is it a carrot? What's that thing that looks like a red potato?"

Sunny had only seen vegetables in the Academy's cafeteria, so he was not well-versed in differentiating them. Teacher Julius had also only mentioned them in passing, since the chances of encountering a vegetable from the real world in the Dream Realm were not very high.

To be precise, he had briefly showed Sunny pictures of the most common Earth vegetables and said that if he ever was to find something that makes him think "huh, that thing looks familiar!"... he should turn around and run.

Cassie smelled her stew and said with a smile.

"I think it's a beetroot."

Sunny blinked.

"...Never heard of it."

While they were innocently chatting, he was observing the Sleepers through his shadow, waiting tensely for things to go wrong.

And pretty soon, they did.

Sunny gritted his teeth when two rough-looking young men suddenly rose from their benches and headed across the hall toward them with unpleasant excitement burning in their eyes.

'Here we go.'

Who would have thought that the thing that landed him in trouble would be Cassie's beauty, of all things? Usually, it was either his sharp tongue or his general obnoxiousness.

Never, not even once, had it been his looks.

'Ouch. I shouldn't be jealous, right?'

The worst part was that the two approaching Sleepers were obviously a part of Gunlaug's gang. It was apparent from their armor and the fact that they carried their weapons in actual sheaths, like a pair of idiots. Memories could be freely summoned out of thin air, so the only reason to keep them visible at all times was for the sake of intimidation.

He had noted that detail after meeting the castle guards yesterday.

What had Harper said? If there is a "misunderstanding" with one of Gunlaug's people, remember that these guys carry a heavy burden. Treat them with respect.

In other words, swallow it.

The young men approached their corner of the table with vulgar smiles. They were clearly undressing Cassie with their eyes. Sunny turned his head and looked up at them.

The Sleepers sitting nearby turned away with heavy looks, clearly afraid and uncomfortable.

'Maybe they just want to say hi.'

Sunny opened his mouth...

'Respectful... remember... be respectful...'

...and said:

"What the fuck are you degenerates staring at?"

The whole hall was suddenly enveloped in silence. Once again, Sunny had found himself in the center of attention.

But this time, everyone was actually staring at him instead of Cassie.

'I... guess that's better?'

The few nearby Sleepers who had pretended to not notice anything a few seconds earlier lowered their heads, as though trying to become smaller and disappear completely.

Sunny glanced at them with disdain and turned back to the pair of young men who were currently towering above him, a dark and dangerous light dancing in their eyes.

To be honest, his incendiary reaction had caught Sunny by surprise. The anger had taken the better of him for a moment, forcing the words out of his mouth. But the damage had already been done.

It seemed as though his brotherly instincts were not only still alive, but also somewhat overwhelming.

'To hell with this. They want to see dark and dangerous? I'll show them.'

He glared at the two idiots, knowing that, at this point, there was no way back. Beside him, Cassie turned her head, an alarmed expression on her face.

One of the idiots grinned.

"Huh. We were just hoping to politely introduce ourselves to this lovely little doll, but hey, we can get acquainted with the ugly little clown first. How about it?"

He glanced at the other Sleeper, who was looking at Sunny with no humor in his eyes whatsoever.

Cassie frowned, then said:

"Why are you..."

However, at that moment, the second young man took a step forward and growled, interrupting her:

"What did you just say, clown? Do you know who we are? Fool, we're Gunlaug's men."

His hand was resting on the pommel of his sword.

Sunny knew that escalating the situation was not a wise thing to do, but at this point, he didn't have a choice. Backing down now would only lead to a disaster. He knew this type of people well: the moment they felt a weakness, it was all over.

They understood only two things — fear and strength.

Outstretching one hand, he scowled, looked the young men right into the eyes, and said:

"Congratulations. Now get lost before I make you dead men."

Perhaps recognizing something in his voice, or maybe in his eyes, the Sleeper who had his hand on the pommel of the sword hesitated. For a second, Sunny almost believed that his threat worked. But then the young man furtively glanced around, and this tiny hope evaporated.

If they were alone, maybe the Sleeper would have reconsidered his desire to antagonize Sunny any further. But with all these people watching, he couldn't show fear.

Sunny failed to account for one crucial detail. All bullies were cowards... but what they feared the most was people finding out about their cowardice.

Gunlaug's man bared his teeth in a threatening grin.

"Those are terribly big words, coming from a puny weakling like you. You know what? I think your girl needs to keep better company. Why don't we help her out by making you disappear?"

Sunny smiled.

'...I guess I'm going to kill a couple of fools today.'

Cassie, meanwhile, was not happy with what was happening at all. The frown on her face deepened.

"I'll decide what company to keep myself. Now, please..."

However, they weren't listening to her.

Sunny was already bracing himself for the worst-case scenario, prepared to summon the Midnight Shard at a moment's notice.

But then, suddenly, a calm voice sounded from behind his back.

"Leave them alone, please. They are my friends."

Caught by surprise, Sunny hurriedly shifted his perspective to the shadow and glanced back.

Behind him, a tall and confident young man stood calmly with his hands resting at his hips. He had brown hair and a gentle, handsome face. His eyes sparkled with friendly humor.

It was...

'Caster?!'

Chapter 138: Unexpected Reunion | Shadow Slave

Without a doubt, it was Caster — the only person Sunny had ever seen defeat Nephis in a fight, even if it was just during training.

Back at the Academy, Caster had been a star of their batch of Sleepers. Handsome and friendly, he was not only popular, but also respected. And although it pained Sunny to admit it, that wasn't only because of his lofty status of a Legacy.

Even other Legacies looked up to him. Many even considered him to be the true king of the rankings, speculating that Changing Star had gotten her first place by mistake.

Caster was powerful, skilled, and charming. He was also humble and had an amiable personality that made it hard for anyone not to like him. His background was impeccable, and his future was unquestionably bright.

Basically, he was the polar opposite of Sunny.

'Damn! I knew that voice sounded familiar!'

Sunny turned his head and stared at the handsome young man in utter bewilderment.

What was that guy doing here?

The two Sleepers who didn't even know how close they had come to tasting the sharp edge of the Midnight Shard were doing the same. There was no more excitement on their faces.

"Oh. It's you."

'That was my line!'

Caster looked at them with a silent smile. There was no apparent hostility in his eyes, but for some reason, Gunlaug's men seemed to lose their desire to

stir trouble. After glancing at each other, one of them said in a hesitant tone:

"You know this guy, Caster?"

He gave them a nod.

"Yeah. We were in the Academy together. Don't mind his rude behavior, guys — that's just how he is. Rough around the edges, but really nice once you get to know him well."

'Since when do we know each other?'

Sunny was irrationally angry at that statement, but forced himself to keep his mouth shut. He understood that Caster was just trying to defuse the situation. Actually, his arrival had been very timely.

Sunny was sure of his ability to dispatch a couple of thugs... but what would happen next? He doubted that other members of Gunlaug's host would just sit and watch.

Becoming involved in a conflict with the masters of the castle on his first day here would have been less than ideal.

The thugs in question, meanwhile, had given up. Trying to keep the appearance of being in control, they glared at Caster darkly and backed down.

"Teach your friend some manners, Caster. Next time we won't be so lenient."

With that, they turned around and retreated back to their seats, throwing menacing looks at anyone who dared to stare at them. Soon, the grand hall was once again filled with the hum of voices.

Caster followed them with his eyes and then turned to Sunny, his smile becoming a little somber.

"That... wasn't a very smart thing to do, my friend."

Sunny scoffed.

"Yeah, well... who says that I'm smart?"

'Wait, no, that didn't come out right!'

The tall young man stared at him for a few seconds and then sighed.

"In any case, it is very nice to see you. Both of you."

With that, he sat down, as though somebody had invited him.

Well... admittedly, there was some connection between them. Wishing to talk to people with whom you had attended Academy was sort of understandable.

Still, Sunny didn't like it.

Throwing a quick glance at Cassie, he smiled coldly and said:

"What? Are you very shocked to see us alive?"

Caster hesitated.

"It is good that you managed to survive."

It seemed that this was his way of admitting that yes, he was surprised, but in a pleasant way.

It wasn't a secret that Sunny and Cassie had been seen as two walking corpses by all the other Sleepers in the Academy. Just like Nephis and Caster occupied the top two positions in the rankings, they were dead last. Because of that, the two of them had been shunned and ostracized.

Of course, when it came to Sunny, he not only welcomed the cold treatment of his peers, but had actually been the one to engineer it.

In any case, no one had wanted to be around them, as though afraid of becoming infected by the invisible aura of death that followed them

wherever they went. Sunny himself had been guilty of avoiding Cassie as much as he could in the past.

It must have been very strange to see the two of them alive and well after months spent among the horrors of the Forgotten Shore.

Cassie smiled.

"Thank you."

Caster reciprocated her smile and asked, his tone strangely warm:

"You are Cassia, right? And you are... uh... Sunless?"

Sunny gave him a curt nod.

"Right. Although I'm surprised that you remember our names. Don't think that we've forgotten how you guys used to treat us."

Cassie squeezed his hand and said in a disapproving tone:

"Sunny!"

Caster chuckled.

"No, no. He's right. We behaved like a bunch of jerks. Looking back... there were a lot of things we did wrong. If only we had known better..."

His voice trailed off, and after being silent for some time, the handsome young man suddenly smiled with nostalgia.

"But still, those days in the Academy were not all bad, right? Heh, I still remember the first time I met you, Sunless. You made quite an impression! All those tall tales: spitting in the faces of awakened tyrants, slaying sword saints with a shake of a finger..."

He chuckled, remembering the good old days.

Sunny grinned.

He was in the mood for some mischief.

"What, that trivial stuff? Ha! Child's games. You should have seen the things I've done in the Labyrinth. Now that's something to brag about."

Caster looked at him with humorous sparks dancing in his eyes.

"Oh? Well... do tell. What else have you done?"

Sunny shrugged with profuse indifference.

"This and that. Let's see..."

He pretended to think for a few moments, and then said in a bored tone:

"I guess the most incredible thing I've done was killing a Great Devil with just one strike of my sword. Finished him right off, no problem at all. I even got a Memory from that kill. Uh, but before you ask — no, I can't show it to you. Because, uh... ugh... oh, right. I ate it..."

Chapter 139 | Shadow Slave

Caster stared at him for a long time, then suddenly laughed. Even Cassie giggled, entertained by Sunny's earnest delivery.

Shaking his head, the handsome young man smiled and said:

"I see your sense of humor did not change. Good, that is good. Few people manage to preserve it here."

Sunny blinked a couple of times and said, pretending to be offended:

"What do you mean, sense of humor? It's the honest truth."

He received another bout of laughter instead of an answer.

'...There was food, safety, and laughter,' he thought suddenly, remembering how Cassie had described the Bright Castle after dreaming of it for the first time.

She had also seen Sunny leading her through its gates. Her prophetic visions were turning out to be frighteningly accurate.

'Makes you wonder about that other vision she saw...'

Not allowing himself to become distracted, Sunny chased away the ominous feeling and hid a smile. Then, with a shrug, he scoffed.

"Well, don't believe me if you don't want to. That was just one of my many adventures, anyway. Although the other ones were, admittedly, less remarkable — you know, the usual stuff: slaying dozens of awakened creatures, being resurrected from the doors of death by a beautiful princess, summoning ancient horrors from the depths of the cursed sea, outsmarting ancient fiends to escape from their clutches, sailing through the abyss on a boat made of demon bones, fighting gargantuan leviathans underwater, and so forth. Mundane crap like that."

As he was talking, Cassie gradually stopped laughing and turned to him with a somewhat startled expression on her face. It seemed as though it was only now, with the harrowing journey already behind them, that she had finally realized how outlandish it all actually was.

Put together, the facts of their bloody struggle to survive sounded like something out of a fairy tale. But they both knew that all of that had actually happened.

It had happened to them.

Caster chuckled.

"Wow. Compared to you, Sunny, my own story sounds kind of lame. I just entered the Dream Realm near the city wall and spent a few days running away from a bunch of terrifying monsters, then stumbled on a hunting party from the Castle, and that's pretty much it."

He sighed.

"By the way, when did you guys arrive? I'm sure I haven't seen you around before."

There was no reason to lie, and Sunny couldn't anyway. Looking longingly at his monster stew, which was slowly growing cold, he sighed and said:

"We reached the Dark City two days ago, and entered the castle yesterday at dusk."

The handsome Legacy stared at him, then blinked a couple of times:

"Wait... wait... what do you mean? Did you guys really spend two months in the Labyrinth?"

'Uh-oh.'

Finally, the moment he had been wary of came. Sunny really didn't want for anyone to think that he was some kind of a powerful figure. First of all, there was no better advantage than being underestimated by the enemy.

Secondly, he still had to hide the fact that Changing Star had not been the only one to receive a True Name in the First Nightmare.

Luckily, he had long thought of an exceptionally convincing excuse.

...When in trouble, blame everything on Nephis.

Laughing inwardly, Sunny pretended to shiver and sighed.

"Yeah. I don't even want to think about it. That place... it's pure hell. Honestly, if it wasn't for Changing Star, both of us would have been long dead."

She wouldn't have survived without his help, too, but Caster didn't need to know that.

Sunny was pretty sure that mentioning Neph's name anywhere near the names of two losers like Cassie and him were believed to be would make anyone think that she had single-handedly carried the both of them to safety on her back.

As it turns out, he was right.

As soon as he mentioned Nephis, something changed on Caster's face. With a strange look in his eyes, the handsome man leaned forward a little and asked in a deceptively calm tone:

"Changing... Lady Nephis is alive? She is here?"

He had already forgotten all about how unlikely it was for someone like Sunny to survive a long journey through the deadly nightmare of the Labyrinth.

Sunny narrowed his eyes slightly. Caster's reaction was a little bit more intense than he had anticipated. It was on the border of being weird.

But then again, the tall and handsome Legacy had seemed to be strangely enamored with Nephis even back at the Academy.

'You bastard!'

Enraged for some unknown reason, Sunny gritted his teeth and said:

"Yeah. She's around."

Turning her head slightly in his direction, Cassie hesitated for a moment, and then added:

"We... we only had two soul shards when we came to the castle. So she is staying in the outer settlement. For now."

Caster leaned back, a hint of disappointment appearing on his face for a fraction of a second. Then, he inhaled deeply and said:

"I see. I see."

Sunny took a sip of his tea and asked:

"Why are you so interested in Nephis all of a sudden?"

The handsome young man looked at him with surprise.

"What? Oh. I'm... I'm just glad to know that more of us survived."

Then, he sighed and shook his head:

"From what I was able to learn, there were no more than seven Sleepers sent to the Forgotten Shore by the Spell this year. Up until today, I thought that I was the only one to survive. It's good... it's good to know that I was wrong."

Caster's face grew solemn.

"If Lady Nephis was with you, that explains how you have managed to reach the Bright Castle alive. But the other three... I'm afraid that they are long dead. May their souls rest in peace."

Sunny and Cassie lowered their heads, coming to terms with this new information. It was true that they had not been treated well by the rest of the Sleepers in the Academy. Still, it was also somewhat heartbreaking to know that several of the kids they had known, even if it was just for a short amount of time, were now gone, killed by the vicious crucible of the Dream Realm.

The cruel and ruthless Nightmare Spell had taken its first victims.

Who would be next?

Without having to look at each other, they quietly repeated Caster's words:

"...May their souls rest in peace."

Chapter 140: True Legacy | Shadow Slave

Some time passed in silence, with each of them thinking about what their own fates would be in this cursed place. Finally, Sunny extricated himself from this dark reverie and asked:

"So you've been here all this time? How are you able to afford to live in the castle? Don't tell me that you have joined this... this golden serpent's army."

Caster sighed.

"No... no, I didn't. Although I'm going to lie if I say that I haven't been tempted to. One way or the other, all roads here lead to Gunlaug and his men. I don't think there's more than a handful of powerful Sleepers who have managed to remain independent. Currently, I'm one of them."

Sunny stared at him a repeated his question:

"How so?"

The handsome young man shrugged.

"My Aspect Ability gives me a certain advantage when it comes to escaping the clutches of the Nightmare Creatures. Not so much with killing them, though. I went on a few hunting expeditions with other independent hunters... but that was a mistake. We barely escaped alive. Still, it landed me a few soul shards. The rest I got from selling a couple of Memories."

Right... unlike them normal people, the proud Legacy had entered the Dream Realm with an entire arsenal of Memories that his clan had prepared for him. He had also started with a somewhat considerable amount of soul essence already absorbed, although it wouldn't have been too much.

Unlike Memories, which could be brought back to the real world by anyone, actual soul shards were physical objects, and as such, only Masters and Saints were able to transport them — because they traveled between realms physically, and not just in spirit like Sleepers and Awakened.

That meant that even rich Legacy clans couldn't afford to feed too much soul essence to their scions in advance. Masters were a rare breed, after all, let alone Saints.

In any case, Caster had it better than anyone else on the Forgotten Shore. His ancestral Memories were enough to buy him months, perhaps even years of a tranquil life in the castle. He could use this time to learn the ins and outs of the Dark City to become an independent hunter or reconsider his position and join Gunlaug's host eventually.

Even in this hell, his background gave him an enormous advantage.

'Lucky bastard...'

...But that still didn't explain why those thugs were so unwilling to get on his bad side.

Sunny frowned.

"Why were Gunlaug's men afraid of you?"

Caster looked at him with irony.

"Those two? Oh, right. You have just arrived at the Castle. Well... basically, there are different kinds of people serving Gunlaug. The guys you have so carelessly offended are members of the Castle Guard. They are at the bottom of the totem pole. They are also the weakest and have little to no real battle experience. What minor reputation I have is enough to make them think twice before messing with me."

For a second, there was a dangerous gleam in his eyes. Because of Caster's amiable personality, when talking to him, it was easy to forget what the word Legacy really meant. Legacies were trained to fight and kill since they could barely walk. Every one of them was a true powerhouse. Sunny had no doubt that Caster's actual reputation in the castle was not as negligible as he would have them believe.

After all, he was the only human... no, actually, the only being Sunny knew of that had managed to defeat Nephis in combat. And in terms of personal power, Nephis was as high as one could get in Sunny's heart.

No one else could even compare.

He was also sure that Caster's reputation was earned by spilling blood.

'I really... really hope that I won't have to face this guy in battle one day,' Sunny thought, feeling a cold sensation that he desperately hoped was not a premonition.

With a sigh, he tried to hide this unease and asked:

"So I shouldn't be worried about their retaliation?"

The amiable young man gave him a nod.

"The two guards you have humiliated might try to do something on their own, but there won't be any reaction from the Host itself. But I doubt that they will. Just don't antagonize them any further."

He suddenly grew serious.

"However, if they were Hunters or, even worse, one of the Pathfinders... even my name would not have protected you. You'd simply be dead. So, please, watch your actions in the future. This castle... in a sense, it can be as dangerous as the city outside. Especially for someone with your... uh... temperament."

'What's that supposed to mean?!'

Sunny wanted to bite back, but then closed his mouth.

...Yeah, he really did have a temperament that attracted trouble. Guilty as charged.

While he was reconsidering his life choices, Cassie suddenly spoke in a quiet voice:

"Caster... is there really no way out of here?"

The proud Legacy looked at her and remained silent for a long time, a somber expression finding its way to his face. His eyes were heavy and bleak.

After a while, he sighed and said:

"None that any of us can ever hope to reach, Cassia. As it is right now, this is where we have to live. Maybe... maybe something will change in the future. But for now, just take care of yourself and try to survive."

Standing up, he glanced at them one last time and smiled:

"It was so nice to see you, guys. Really. I'll leave you to your food now, if that's okay. If you need anything in the future, don't hesitate to come find me. My quarters are in the Tower of Dawn."

'Quarters... of course that miscreant has "quarters" ...'

With that, Caster left, letting Sunny finally get to his stew, which was barely warm by that point.

'Great! Breakfast is ruined!' he thought angrily, drilling two holes in the tall Sleeper's back. 'His fault! It's all his fault, not mine. Yeah, definitely...'

Some time later, Sunny was lying on his bed with his eyes closed. The Tower of Dusk was calm and quiet.

It was time to send his shadow on a walk...

Chapter 141: Golden Serpent | Shadow Slave

Other the next five days, Sunny mostly stayed in his room while his shadow stealthily prowled around the castle, spying on people and learning their secrets.

Slowly, he began to understand the undercurrents that flowed beneath the seemingly peaceful surface of life in this pristine white fortress.

Of course, in reality, things weren't peaceful at all — and as far from pure as one could imagine. But that was to be expected from a place where hundreds of lost youths lived with no hope of ever finding their way back home, away from all the restraints of civilization.

He wasn't surprised at all. If anything, it was strange to see some semblance of law and order, no matter how detestable and revolting, persevere despite all the obstacles that stood in the way. Somehow, the inhabitants of the castle were able to coexist with each other in a fragile balance.

The system was cleverly built in a way that allowed the abused to dream of a better life and restrained the abusers from going too far. Better life meant winning Gunlaug's favor, while going too far meant losing it and being banished into the cold darkness of the outer settlement.

Both fear and hope were created and firmly grasped by the Bright Lord. Their mere existence kept people in their places. Sunny suspected that the same dynamic, just substituted for a different kind of reality, reigned in the slum outside of the castle walls.

The outer settlement seemed to exist separate from the castle, but in fact, both were simply parts of one large ecosystem.

People on the outside longed to be allowed inside, while people on the inside dreaded being exiled to the outside. Because the possibility of a better life — or a worse one — existed, they were distracted from the fact that, no matter what happened, they would still be spinning in a circle.

Like a serpent biting its own tail, the Bright Castle and the outer settlement created a closed cycle of exploitation and abuse that, paradoxically, kept everyone in the Dark City sane and alive.

It was nothing short of ingenious.

...Of course, Sunny wanted no part of it.

He didn't know how many people were currently surviving in the slum, but there were somewhere around five hundred Sleepers living in the ancient stronghold. However, not all of them shared the same status. There was a complex hierarchy in place, separating people into different castes. Some of these groups had a distinct place in the hierarchy, while others were less clearly defined.

Most of the inhabitants of the castle, unsurprisingly, were directly serving Gunlaug. They were Guards, Hunters, Pathfinders, Artisans, and Handmaidens. Ruling over them were five lieutenants who answered directly to the lord himself, each responsible for their own aspect of the day-to-day life of the fortress.

The Castle Guard was the largest of these groups, consisting of around one hundred and fifty men. They were in charge of guarding the stronghold and enforcing Gunlaug's laws. Just like Caster had said, they were near the bottom of the totem pole in terms of power and status.

Anyone with a remotely useful Aspect Ability could join the Guard, and although their training was rather rigorous, actual opportunities to experience combat were few and far between. That was not to say that their job was not dangerous: every time a stray Nightmare Creature climbed the hill or attacked from above, it was their duty to either kill or chase the monster away.

And out here in the Dark City, no monster was anything less than terrifying and absolutely deadly.

The Castle Guard was led by a morose giant of a man named Tessai, who was one of Gunlaug's most trusted lieutenants and perhaps the oldest

Sleeper on the Forgotten Shore — he was just two years short of thirty. Tessai was a ferocious fighter and ruthless commander, holding his subordinates in an iron grip.

Above the Castle Guard, there were Hunters. These were the elites of Gunlaug's forces, each possessing a powerful combat Aspect, rich battle experience, and sharp wit to make use of both. There were around fifty of them, divided into seven hunting parties.

Each morning, as soon as the gates of the castle opened, one of the parties left the safety of the impregnable marble walls and ventured into the harrowing maze of the Dark City to hunt and kill Awakened creatures. It was thanks to their efforts that people in the ancient stronghold had food on their plates. Without them, none of this would have been possible.

Hunters were recruited from the ranks of Guards, and becoming a Hunter was a dream come true. That was because these professionals enjoyed plentiful rewards from the lord, such as living in a room of their own as opposed to cramped barracks, better food and access to various luxury items, best Memories and tools the Bright Castle could provide... as well as many other things.

Of course, the other side of the coin was that their lives were often the shortest. Despite all their experience and preparations, many never returned from the hunts.

And the only reason any did at all was the Pathfinders.

Pathfinders served as guides for the hunting parties. Just as Effie had said, the secret to surviving in the Dark City was to find and kill comparatively weaker creatures without stumbling into something far more deadly. They made sure to do just that — track the Awakened monsters without leading the pack of Hunters into the jaws of Fallen abominations.

There were so few Pathfinders that Sunny even questioned whether they could be categorized as a group. In the whole castle, there were less than a dozen. Each of them was a seasoned veteran who earned his role through surviving long years of bloody battles in the ruins, and thus had a chance to

live long enough to learn large areas of the Dark City like his own five fingers.

Needless to say, all of them were incredibly fearsome combatants and enjoyed lavish, sometimes even decadent lifestyles.

Both Hunters and Pathfinders were led by a charismatic man called Gemma. Gemma came to the Forgotten Shore in the same year as Gunlaug, and had helped him take control of the castle.

Together, these three groups — Guards, Hunters, and Pathfinders — formed Gunlaug's army, which was simply known as the Host.

Chapter 142: Behind The Scenes

There were two other groups of people that belonged to Gunlaug.

The first of them consisted of Sleepers with useful Utility Abilities and their helpers. These people, known as Artisans, played a very important role in the life of the castle. They were responsible for creating and maintaining various items that were either vital to survival or made existing on the Forgotten shore less unbearable, such as clothes, tools, equipment, utensils, and various gear.

Each Artisan had a small team of less gifted Sleepers helping them craft the necessary items. All in all, there were around a hundred of them in total, with most of that number consisting of the assistants. They were led by a young woman called Kido, who was a talented manager and had an Ability that allowed her to change attributes of certain plants.

The vegetables in Sunny's stew came from her garden. Since such an Ability was nothing short of priceless on the Forgotten Shore, where food was scarce and mostly homogenous, it wasn't surprising that she had become one of the lieutenants despite being much younger than the rest of them.

The status of Artisans was somewhat of a tense subject in the Bright Castle. Because they were largely non-combatants, Guards felt that their position should be inferior to that of people actually risking their lives in vicious battles against Nightmare Creatures.

Artisans, on the contrary, believed that the rarity of Utility Aspects and the vital role they played in maintaining the living conditions inside the castle should land them more prestige than the Castle Guard, which basically recruited any random nobody, enjoyed. This conflict had been simmering for a long time, and was not going to be resolved anytime soon.

Funnily enough, Hunters, who risked their lives the most, did not care about the issue one way or another. Their leader Gemma, however, was silently

supporting the Artisans and their chief, Kido — which prevented the Guards from being too forceful in their argument.

The last group of people who belonged to Gunlaug was the Handmaidens. These were the young women Sunny had seen quietly performing various chores around the castle, like making sure that windows were properly closed before the onset of the night or preparing and handing out food during mealtime.

They were responsible for maintaining the castle itself, as well as serving the high-ranking members of the Host. There were also around a hundred of them.

From what Sunny knew about the world, these poor girls should have been the prime victims of abuse within the walls of the ancient stronghold, but to his surprise, they were actually strangely revered, and even a little feared. The main reason for this was their leader, a mysterious and strikingly beautiful woman known as Seishan.

Seishan not only took care of her Handmaidens, but also secretly taught them how to defend themselves. The exact extent of their training was unknown, but Sunny clearly saw that members of the Castle Guard were very careful to behave themselves around Handmaidens... most of the time.

The other reason was that, like everything else in the castle, the young women technically belonged to Gunlaug, and Gunlaug was very particular about people laying hands on his belongings without permission. Even if some foolish Guard was brave enough to anger Seishan, no one with a desire to live was willing to get on the bad side of the Bright Lord.

...Sunny, however, was already scared enough by Seishan herself. The first time he had sent his shadow to take a look at what the Handmaidens were up to when no one was watching, it had almost gotten caught.

That was the first time someone managed to sense his shadow. One moment, beautiful Seishan was calmly standing with her back to the shaded corner where it was concealed, giving instructions to one of her

subordinates, and in the next, she suddenly turned around and looked directly at the hiding shadow.

Not knowing what else to do, Sunny shut his eyes and shifted all of his perception back. He was fairly sure that no one would be able to directly see the shadow — after all, his innate stealth enhancement was even more pronounced when it came to his silent companion.

However, there were a lot of different Aspects. Many Awakened, for example, were able to feel when someone was looking at them. Praying that this was the case here, Sunny waited for a while before cautiously opening one eye.

Luckily, this time, he didn't cause too much of a commotion. Confirming that Seishan had returned to her conversation, he hurriedly sent the shadow away and made sure to stay away from the mysterious beauty, and her Handmaidens in general, ever since.

The last hundred people in the castle were those who paid tribute, but didn't serve Gunlaug directly. There was no real name for this group, so Sunny simply called them "tenants" in his mind.

There were two types of tenants: a smaller number of them were those who were able to make a decent living by providing Gunlaug's men with various services, mostly having to do with craftsmanship and entertainment. For example, there was a man who created something akin to a music lounge, another one who operated a small theatre troupe, and even an entrepreneurial girl who owned a gambling den.

A larger number of tenants were people like Harper — those who had entered the castle through luck and remained there by the skin of their teeth, desperately trying to earn soul shards for tribute by acting as servants and doing various menial jobs.

These poor folks were at the very bottom of the social hierarchy of the castle.

...And on the opposite side of that hierarchy, there was the golden serpent, the master of the castle, Bright Lord Gunlaug himself.

The man who, by Effie's description, was nearly immortal.

On his fifth day in the ancient stronghold, Sunny had finally laid eyes on this loathsome tyrant.

He didn't like what he saw at all.

Chapter 143: Gunlaug | Shadow Slave

Despite the fact that Gunlaug's heavy presence permeated every centimeter of the castle, the Bright Lord himself was strangely elusive. He didn't show himself often, preferring to rule through his five proxies. Whether it was out of arrogance, paranoia or some other reason, Sunny did not know.

After the incident with Seishan, he was afraid to let his shadow walk too freely and tried to avoid going anywhere near the fearsome master of the ancient stronghold. Because of these precautions, he had not seen Gunlaug until their fifth day in the castle.

As it turned out, when Golden Serpent did show up, he liked to leave an impression.

Sunny and Cassie were about to receive their usual breakfast when the whole grand hall suddenly grew deathly silent. Feeling that something was wrong, they turned to the entrance — just in time to see a torrent of Guards pouring inside.

Sunny's heart skipped a beat.

'What's this?'

Fearing for the worst, he tried to think of the best way to escape... but luckily, the menacing soldiers of the Host paid them no attention. Instead, they quickly dispersed around the hall and moved the long tables to the walls, creating a large open space in the middle.

Cassie grasped Sunny's shoulder and whispered:

"What is going on?"

He hesitated, then answered uncertainly:

"I'm not sure..."

Suddenly, he caught sight of Caster standing among the crowd. The handsome young man had a solemn look on his face. His gaze was turned to the dark alcove at the far end of the hall.

One by one, all the Sleepers turned to face the same direction. Sunny followed their example.

Slowly, five figures stepped out of the darkness of the alcove and stood at the steps leading up to the throne. They were Gemma, Tessai, Seishan, Kido, and the last of the five lieutenants.

When Sunny noticed him, an involuntary shudder run through his body.

The fifth lieutenant had no official duties in the Bright Castle, but everyone here feared him the most. It was a strange, pale man with a bony face and glassy, emotionless eyes. His spine was twisted, making him appear deceptively short.

The hunchback was wearing simple black clothes with no adornments and holding himself with a bit of awkwardness, as though uncomfortable with all the attention.

His name was Harus, and he was Bright Lord's hidden blade and executioner. When someone needed to be disposed of, he was sent to carry out the punishment. If Gunlaug wanted everyone to know about his displeasure, there would be rivers of blood left in his wake. If not, there wouldn't be even a single drop.

People would just disappear, as though they had never existed.

Harus was Gunlaug's murderous shadow.

Many of the inhabitants of the castle had seen nightmares in which they awoke only to see his glassy, cold eyes staring at them from the darkness. For some, those nightmares became a reality. Harus was willing and eager to follow any command of his master, no matter how vile.

What disturbed Sunny the most, however, was that looking at Harus was like looking at a dark mirror. Despite the fact that they were almost nothing alike, for some reason, he couldn't help but recognize traces of himself in the sadistic butcher.

Or, to be precise, of a possible future version of himself.

'N—no way... I am... I am much more pleasant on the eye.'

Forcing himself to look away before the hunchback felt his stare, Sunny turned his head and looked at the tall man who had finally appeared from the darkness.

At least he assumed that it was a man, and not some golden demon.

Bright Lord Gunalug was clad in a strange, gilded armor that covered his tall figure from head to toe, not leaving even his eyes exposed. It seemed simultaneously solid and liquid, almost flowing over his mighty muscles and broad, powerful shoulders.

In the place where his face should have been, a smooth and empty expanse of polished gold reflected the frightened faces of hundreds of Sleepers back at them. Sunny saw his own reflection staring at him and suddenly realized how small and weak he was in front of this brilliant giant.

His legs trembled.

The pressure Gunlaug exerted on the space around him was almost palpable. All the people near Sunny were going through a similar kind of experience as him. Their faces were pale, their eyes wide, drops of sweat appearing on their temples. Even the lieutenants seemed slightly uncomfortable, affected by this oppressive aura just like the rest of them.

'God... damn... it... that's not an aura, that's a mind attack!'

Protected by the [Doubtless] trait of the Puppeteer's Shroud, Sunny was more resistant to such attacks than most. Gritting his teeth, he shook off the

effects of Gunlaug's psychic pressure and drew in a deep breath. Then, he glanced at Cassie, concerned about her well-being.

To his surprise, the blind girl was doing absolutely fine. Unlike the rest of them, she wasn't showing any signs of distress. Sunny stared at her and blinked a couple of times.

'The reflection... this all started when I saw my reflection in the visor of that bastard's weird armor... but Cassie is blind, so...'

It seemed as though Gunlaug wasn't actually attacking them. It was just an enchantment of that strange golden armor of his. Whoever looked at its mirror-like face was immediately assaulted by a crippling feeling of awe, dread, and the crushing desire to submit.

'What... what kind of a Memory can practically paralyze several hundred people just from its passive effect?' Sunny thought, astonished.

How was this possible?

Meanwhile, Gunlaug approached the empty white throne and gracefully sat down. The light falling from the numerous holes in the back wall of the alcove reflected from his armor, making it appear as though he was enveloped by a bright radiance.

The golden mirror that served him as a face turned to gaze at the rows of Sleepers trembling at his feet.

A few moments later, a deep and insidious voice resounded from all around them, as though the castle itself was whispering into their ears:

"Ah, what a nice day it is today. A perfect day for justice, don't you think, my precious wards? I've heard that there's a criminal hiding among us today. Well... am I not fair? Am I not just? Let me show you how just I am..."

Chapter 144: Right Of Challenge

Sunny felt cold sweat running down his back. Shaken by Gunlaug's serpentine voice, he was tempted to fall to his knees and beg for forgiveness. However, he also understood that every person in the grand hall currently felt the same urge.

Everyone here had done something that might be considered a crime by the tyrant.

He almost expected to hear people begin confessing their sins, but at that moment, a strange commotion at the doors attracted his attention.

Moving with menacing determination, two guards dragged a man to the center of the hall and threw him on the floor. The man was dressed in rags and painfully lean, which betrayed his nature as a dweller of the outer settlement.

However, there were ropes of powerful muscles rolling under his thin skin, and an angry, fearless look in his eyes that made the man appear proud and defiant. Throwing a contemptuous stare at the guards, he picked himself up from the floor and stood up, his back straight and his head held high. There was no ounce of fear on his face. Instead, there was dark, furious resentment.

Gunlaug looked down on the brave man from his throne and slightly tilted his head. The outsider grimaced after seeing his reflection in the golden mask, but still didn't lower his head.

'That's pure willpower,' Sunny thought, impressed by the stranger.

Meanwhile, Bright Lord's voice resounded in the grand hall once again:

"My wards. We have a guest today. This man, called Jubei, is visiting us from the outer settlement. Recently, he had been heard leveraging an accusation against one of my men. As a just and benevolent lord, I have invited Jubei here to plead his case and expose the criminal. We must get to

the bottom of this matter! After all, the law is our only guiding star in this dark world..."

Despite being free from the psychic pressure emanated by Gunlaug's armor, Sunny still felt strangely affected by his deep, soft voice. He even got goosebumps. With or without the golden Memory, Bright Lord possessed a powerful and ingratiating charisma. It was hard not to listen to him.

But the man called Jubei just smirked.

"That's right. I'm here to accuse one of your thugs, Gunlaug. Let's see how you'll get out of this one, bastard."

With that, he raised one hand and pointed a finger at the group of Hunters watching the proceeding from their usual corner of the grand hall.

"That man right there, one of your so-called Pathfinders, is guilty of murder. He had killed an innocent kid in the most repugnant of ways. I've been watching you and your minions commit all sorts of vile crimes over these years, but enough is enough. Today, I'll see him answer with his life for what he did!"

A wave of shocked whispers ran through the crowd. Accusing a Pathfinder was not something a sane person would ever do. Due to their venerated status, these men were nearly untouchable. And yet, Jubei seemed unrelenting.

Gunlaug spoke:

"...Is that so? That is a heavy accusation, Jubei. Please, tell us more."

The man from the outer settlement gritted his teeth.

"That scum and his people lured a naive kid into their party by promising him all kinds of rewards and riches. They told him that he is going to become one of them and come to live in your damn castle. But in reality, they just fed him to the monsters as bait!"

He spat on the floor.

"You dare to call yourself Hunters, you damn cowards?! Don't you have any shame?!"

A heavy silence settled in the grand hall. People were now staring at the group of Hunters with dark expressions on their faces. The inhabitants of the castle were used to pretending to be blind to all kinds of wicked deeds, but all those deeds were committed by humans against other humans.

What they couldn't forgive was a human being betraying another of their kind to the Nightmare Creatures. In the Dark City, this was tantamount to sacrilege.

Gunlaug turned his head to face the Hunters, who shivered under his gaze.

"Is this true?"

The oldest of the group, the Pathfinder, glanced darkly at Jubei and scowled.

"There must be some kind of a misunderstanding, my lord. The boy in question was a highly valued member of my party. We all had high hopes for his future. His death saddened all of us a great deal."

His voice was steady and calm. Perhaps even a little too calm.

Jubei snarled:

"Lies! I happened to be hunting on that day myself and saw everything with my own two eyes! I know what you did, bastard!"

Gunlaug turned to face the crows and sighed. After some time had passed, he solemnly said:

"What an unfortunate situation. It seems that it is your word against his, Jubei. What to do, what to do? I trust my brave men wholeheartedly, of course. Who would be so ungrateful as to distrust these heroes when they are the ones keeping you all alive? Surely, there's no one that vile and wicked among you, my precious wards."

Sunny held his breath, feeling singled out by the insidious voice. The chilling threat hidden behind these words was not very subtle.

Gunalug was silent for a few moments, battering the crowd with his oppressive psychic aura. Then, he turned away, letting the people breathe, and said:

"But it would be unbecoming of me to play favorites in such a grave matter. And this matter, oh, it is grave indeed. What a dilemma. How do we uphold justice, my wards?"

In the ensuing silence, Gemma, the leader of both Hunters and Pathfinders, suddenly spoke:

"My lord, if I may speak. Isn't there a law that suits this situation perfectly? It has existed for as long as humans lived in this ancient castle. I'm talking, of course, about the right of challenge."

He glanced at Jubei and smiled:

"If this brave hunter has any shadow of doubt about his accusation, he should step down. If not, he can challenge the criminal and prove it with blood. Of course, the real culprit here is... me. As the person responsible for these men, any crime they commit in their roles as Hunters is my fault."

Gemma's charismatic smile was wide and friendly.

"So how about, Jubei? Will you step down? Or do you want to challenge me?"

The hunter from the outer settlement glared at him for a while, his eyes burning with fury and contempt. Finally, he spat:

"Do you think I'm afraid of you, lapdog? Sure, why not. I challenge you!"

Chapter 145: Justice | Shadow Slave

The whole spectacle was so smoothly orchestrated that Sunny was almost tempted to believe in it. Of course, he knew better.

The only thing he didn't know was whether the bits performed by the Pathfinder and Gemma were rehearsed in advance or improvised on the fly to fulfill their lord's desire to maintain appearances while having the man who had dared to speak openly against him publicly executed.

And that was what this was, an execution. Sunny didn't believe for a second that Gunlaug was going to give the brave hunter a chance to leave the grand hall alive. No, he wanted him dead, and he wanted everyone to see him die.

...Lest they get the idea that it was possible to run their mouths against him and escape unscathed.

And yet, and yet... a tiny ember of hope still burned in Sunny's heart. From the looks of it, Jubei was an experienced hunter. A capable, seasoned warrior who faced numerous monsters and ended up on top every time. He was very strong, with enough willpower and resolve to crush rocks into dust. Perhaps a miracle would happen.

No matter how small, there was a possibility.

That's why Sunny couldn't understand why Gunlaug would be willing to risk his right-hand man's life in this farce.

...As though reading his thoughts, the Bright Lord spoke:

"A challenge? Ah, so be it. This is a sacred tradition, indeed. As long as good men are willing to put their lives on the line for the sake of righteousness, depravity can't win..."

The crowd of Sleepers exploded into whispers. Some of them were tense and somber, others filled with dark anticipation. The corner of Sunny's mouth turned downwards.

From what he could see, depravity had already won, or at least gotten the upper hand.

But Gunlaug wasn't done speaking:

"...However, it would not be suitable for you to represent the accused personally, Gemma. The Bright Castle can't afford to lose you, my friend. Jubei, would you mind if the accused chose another champion?"

The hunter from the outer settlement simply shrugged and said:

"Bring your worst, cowards."

Bright Lord turned to the Pathfinder and tilted his head. With his suddenly pale face reflected in the eerie mask of the strange golden armor, the murderer remained silent for a few moments, and then said in a quiet voice:

"I choose Harus, my lord."

Everyone suddenly grew silent. Sunny himself felt cold shivers running down his spine. Why did it have to be that creepy wicked cripple...

In the deathly silence, Jubei smirked and spat with grim satisfaction:

"Even better!"

It seemed that he had a score to settle with the silent hunchback, too.

Harus, who had looked a little bored and uncomfortable through the whole procedure, stared at the Pathfinder who had named him with no particular expression on his bony face, and then slowly walked down the steps.

The other lieutenants reacted to this unexpected turn of events differently. Gemma frowned and threw a quick glance at Gunlaug before stepping back with a dark expression. Tessai grinned, as though expecting a good spectacle. Kido grew a little pale and took a little step sideways, trying to distance herself from the descending hunchback as much as possible.

Only Seishan remained silent and indifferent, not allowing any emotion to appear on her cold, beautiful face.

Realizing what was about to happen, Cassie squeezed Sunny's arm and whispered:

"Sunny, I want to leave."

After a short pause, he answered in a raspy voice:

"I'm sorry. We can't leave now."

Despite the fact that he didn't want to be anywhere near Gunlaug's scarecrow, he knew that leaving now would draw too much attention. They couldn't risk that in the presence of all five lieutenants, not to mention Golden Serpent himself.

What's more, his mission in the castle was to gather as much information as possible. He couldn't miss the chance to see one of the most dangerous creatures in this deceptively peaceful stronghold in action.

...And there was this dark feeling deep within his heart that one day, somehow, he and Harus were going to end up bloodied, with only one of them walking away alive from the fight. It was as though an invisible thread connected them together.

Perhaps it was a string of fate.

Meanwhile, the hunchback descended from the steps and stopped opposite Jubei in the empty space that had been cleared in the center of the grand hall. His face was still motionless and a little bored.

Sunny held his breath.

As Gunlaug sat silently on the white throne, Jubei summoned his Memories. A flexible armor made out of red scales appeared on his body, complete with a winged helmet and a kite shield. In his hand, a curved scimitar weaved itself from the sparks of light. Its blade was as sharp as a razor.

The hunter glanced at Harus and said in a steady voice:

"Let's see what you're capable of, butcher."

The hunchback just looked at him with his glassy eyes and silently allowed his thick cloak to fall on the floor. Then, he grimaced and straightened his spine as much as he could, suddenly losing the appearance of a small and fragile cripple.

At his full height, Harus towered above most of the Sleepers in the grand hall, losing only to the giant Tessai. His monstrous, twisted shape radiated a sense of deep, bestial power. He didn't bother to summon any Memories, staring at the hunter with the same cold indifference.

Jubei scowled.

"So be it."

Full of anxiety, Sunny held his breath.

The proud hunter lunged forward, raising his shield and at the same time slashing with the scimitar. His movements were incredibly fast and nimble, his technique sharpened by years of bloody battles in the Dark City and guided by rich experience.

'Good... he's good...'

Did Jubei... really have a chance?

As Sunny's eyes widened, Harus seemed to miss the attack completely. As though forgetting that he wasn't armed, the hunchback simply raised a hand to meet the razor-sharp blade.

...And gripped it with his bare fist, stopping Jubei's strike in its tracks.

For a fraction of a second, everyone in the grand hall froze in astonishment — except for the hunter, who immediately tried to wrestle his scimitar from the iron grip of the Gunlaug's killer. But it was of no use. It was as though the saber was stuck in stone.

It wouldn't have mattered anyway.

In the next moment, Harus moved forward with a snake-like speed and put his large hand on Jubei's shoulder. Then, with a sickening sound, he effortlessly tore the entire arm off.

Somebody screamed.

As blood spilled on the marble floor, the proud hunter stared at the stump that had suddenly replaced his dominant arm in disbelief, not yet feeling the terrible pain that would soon follow. However, it never did.

Before Jubei could even react, Harus grasped his head with both hands and snapped his neck in one brutal, violent motion. Then, he hit the hunter in the chest, shattering his ribs and sending the body flying back a dozen meters.

The broken corpse of the defiant challenger fell on the floor, rivers of blood flowing from its terrible wounds onto the pristine white stones.

From start to finish, the whole fight took no more than five seconds.

Harus looked at his hands, shook a few crimson droplets off, and then silently returned to his place beside the master of the castle, his expression still cold.

However, it wasn't bored anymore.

Instead, it was full of subtle glee.

After all, he had just helped his lord pass down judgment.

This was law, this was tradition.

This was justice.

Chapter 146: Power | Shadow Slave

Several hundred Sleepers stared at the disfigured body, horrified. Jubei's scale armor disappeared in a rain of light, leaving him dressed only in torn, bloodied rags. A surprised, dazed expression was still frozen on his face.

Awash in blood and broken, the man who had been proud and defiant just a minute ago was now nothing but a pathetic corpse. He was sprawled on the floor in a glistening crimson puddle, reminding everyone of one simple truth.

Never, ever dare to disobey Gunlaug, the Bright Lord.

Or you'll end up just the same.

Sunny was probably one of the only two people in the grand hall who wasn't looking at the corpse. Instead, he was looking at Harus.

Harus himself was staring at the wall, absolutely disinterested in the gruesome fruit of his dark labor.

'What else was I hoping for? Stupid. Hope... hope is a poison. It will only get you killed.'

Sunny knew all the facts, but only now had he finally understood how hopeless it was to even think about challenging the Golden Serpent.

Everything in the Dark City was designed to make him and his army invincible. That was how the damn hunchback had managed to defeat the experienced hunter from the outer settlement so easily, using nothing but his raw strength. He hadn't even had to show his Aspect Ability. Why was the divide in their physical prowess so vast?

That was because with every human in the Dark City possessing the same dormant core, there were only two things that could make someone more powerful than the rest: Soul Essence and Memories.

And both were monopolized by Gunlaug.

Only he possessed the manpower and knowledge to freely hunt in the Dark City. This way, he had become the only person with a reliable source of both Soul Shards and Memories in his possession.

Whatever crumbs the independent hunters were able to acquire would inevitably end up in his hands, too, because Gunlaug also controlled the primitive economy in this cursed place. By providing food and safety in exchange for the so-called "tribute", he made sure that all the resources would flow in only one direction.

Into his hands.

With Soul Shards and a vast arsenal of Memories, he could make his army stronger, which in turn would bring him more Soul Shards and Memories, which in turn would make his army stronger... and so forth. It was a simple, perfect, and harrowing cycle that made his power more and more absolute with each revolution.

By the time Sunny, Nephis and Cassie had arrived in the Dark City, the divide between Gunlaug's forces and everyone else here was too wide to ever be bridged. Sunny had no doubt that most of the elite warriors of the Host had their cores saturated with Soul Essence to the brim.

There was a limit to how many Soul Shards a Nightmare Spell carrier could absorb before reaching the bottleneck of their rank... although few ever did. Advancing to the next rank removed that bottleneck and enhanced their bodies according to the saturation level of the core. But with no way to advance, people in the Dark City could only rely on the raw amount of Soul Essence to accumulate power.

This meant that within these ancient walls, sworn into servitude to a single man, there lived the most powerful group of Sleepers to ever exist in human history.

...And this was the man Nephis planned to kill.

With a shudder, Sunny remembered Effie's words: "...no Sleeper can defeat Gunlaug, ever. It's simply impossible."

He also remembered dozens of skulls swinging in the wind above the castle gates.

'Curse it all... what is she going to pull me into this time? I really have to persuade her to give up for once. My life might depend on it.'

But somehow, he doubted that Changing Star even knew how to give up. At least not when it came to her mysterious goal.

'Curses!'

Sunny was so consumed by these dark thoughts that he even neglected to listen to Gunlaug's farewell speech. He had the general idea of what kind of bullcrap the bastard was proselytizing anyway.

Soon, the Bright Lord had left his white throne and disappeared into the darkness behind it. The lieutenants followed, with Harus being the last one to leave. As soon as they were gone, the body of Jubei was unceremoniously dragged away, and a group of Handmaidens silently wiped the puddle of blood off the pristine marble floor.

The tables were moved back to their places, and the crowd of Sleepers was invited to return to their breakfast. As if nothing had happened.

However, Sunny had completely lost his appetite. Leading Cassie away, he glanced at the plates full of food and thought without humor:

'I guess there's a first time for everything.'

For the remaining two days, Sunny had done nothing but frantically gather information. Knowing that he will be leaving the castle soon, he became a little bit bolder in where to send his shadow.

He spent a lot of time spying on the Hunters and Pathfinders, learning their tactics and secrets. He observed how Guards were trained. He learned which Artisans were important, and which were not. The only caste he tried to avoid was the Handmaidens.

He even studied various engravings and stone carvings that decorated the walls of the castle.

Finally, the week they had paid tribute for came to an end. On the dawn of the eighth day, Sunny and Cassie once again appeared in the large hall with beautiful stained glass windows and saw the gates of the castle.

Despite the fact that there was nothing outside these gates but a dirty slum, Sunny felt relieved. He couldn't wait to leave this damn place.

'Why do people even want to live here?'

As soon as he finished this thought, Sunny realized that he didn't actually know what life in the outer settlement was like. Perhaps the castle was actually a paradise in comparison.

'I doubt it... how bad can it actually be? I guess they just never lived in the outskirts.'

Shaking his head, he walked toward the gates, but then stopped when someone called his name.

Turning his head, Sunny noticed the familiar young man with a thin face and nervous eyes. Today, Harper seemed to be especially distressed. His clothes were a bit less tidy, and there were a few ugly blotches of ink on his parchment.

"Ah! Sun... Sunless and Cassia, right? Goodness, it has already been a week. Ah... where was I? Oh, yes. Are you guys here to pay tribute for the next one?"

Sunny stared at him for a few minutes, then forced out a smile and pretended to be sad:

"No. We haven't been able to... you know, earn shards. So, we're leaving. Maybe we will see each other again, someday."

Harper opened his eyes wide and stuttered:

"W—what? Why would I be... oh, sorry. I'm very sorry that you couldn't stay longer. But don't despair! Lord Gunlaug is truly kind, and life is unpredictable. I'm sure you'll be able to come back soon."

Sunny gave him a curt nod and turned away.

'I hope not. Not too soon, at least.'

With that, they passed through the gates and left the Bright Castle... the promised castle they had spent so much time seeking and dreaming of.

What a disappointment it all had been.

Standing under the grey skies of the Forgotten Shore once again, Sunny and Cassie breathed in the cold fresh air and both smiled. Cassie tugged on his sleeve.

"Sunny... what do we do now?"

He looked at the pitiful slum that lay beneath them and answered without having to think for too long:

"What else? We go find Nephis."

Chapter 147: Guild Hall | Shadow Slave

Cassie smiled, but then suddenly frowned and asked:

"But, Sunny... how do we find her?"

He thought for a few seconds, then shrugged.

"I'm not sure. Follow the sounds of mayhem? This place is not that big. I'm sure we'll manage."

They descended the stairs and entered the slum, with Sunny looking around in search of the distinct tall figure. There weren't that many Sleepers in the outer settlement who possessed an armor-type Memory, so he was sure of his ability to notice Changing Star in the crowd.

Soon, they were surrounded by makeshift hovels and people that had empty, bleak eyes. Some of them stared at them with pity, realizing that the two had just been sent away from the castle, others openly gloated. Sunny paid them no attention.

Once again, he was surprised by the sharp contrast between the castle and the outer settlement. No matter how vile the underside of the ancient stronghold was, people were actually living there, walking around with mostly mundane human worries written on their faces.

Here in the slum, people were merely existing, and barely at that. In their eyes, there was a more dire need and a more consummate fear: the need to find food for the day, the fear of being devoured by some unseen monster in the night. They were all gaunt, cold, and listless.

The only time hope appeared on their faces was when their gazes accidentally fell on the Bright Castle.

'Hope will get you killed, fools. You have it better here than those poor souls in the fortress.'

All in all, it was not so different from the outskirts, with the added terror of Nightmare Creatures waiting somewhere in the shadows.

But then, there were monsters in the real world as well. They just wore human skin.

Sunny was once again reminded of how surprisingly well prepared he was for the trials of the Nightmare Spell, his lack of education not included.

Surprisingly, there was no sign of Nephis anywhere. They walked through the entire settlement before finally catching the glimpse of her.

At the very edge of the slum, perched precariously above the vertical fall from the stone platform, stood an uncharacteristically spacious dwelling. It was crudely put together out of slabs of stone that had been unceremoniously scavenged from the ruins, with many of them still bearing the intricate carvings left behind by the original inhabitants of the Dark City.

This barbarous atrocity was the closest to the road of white stone out of the entire outer settlement. Perhaps that was why it seemed to be a bit sturdier than the rest of the hovels. The lodge even had a small addition built on top of it, somewhat resembling a second storey.

Changing Star was sitting on its roof with her legs crossed, gazing at the rising sun and the cursed city below. In the pale light of dawn, her ivory skin and silver hair looked beautiful and eerie.

She had dismissed her armor and was wearing a crude tunic, with a piece of rope tied around her waist. Sensing their approach, Nephis turned her head and glanced in their direction.

Then, she stood up and jumped down, landing lightly on the stone surface of the vast platform.

Sunny grinned.

"Hey, Neph. Long time no see!"

Nephis led them inside the stone lodge, which had turned out to be her new residence. The interior was spartan and austere, with pieces of broken furniture lying here and there and cold winds sweeping freely through the spacious hall of the first floor.

Despite its larger size and superior craftsmanship, the lodge had been empty when she found it. No one wanted to live this close to both the edge of the platform at the threshold of the road, where the risk of being attacked by Nightmare Creatures was the highest. But Changing Star didn't mind.

Looking around, Sunny scoffed.

"Gee. This place surely needs some work."

Neph shrugged, seemingly not very concerned with her living conditions.

Well, they did spend the past two months sleeping on nothing but rocks and dirt, so in a sense, even this ramshackle mess was an enormous improvement. With some improvements, it could even become somewhat of a decent place.

Suddenly, Sunny felt a little guilty about all the comfort and warmth he had experienced in the castle. He was even fed delicious fresh food twice a day.

Speaking of food...

Cassie smiled and handed Neph a small bundle. Concerned about her friend, she had not eaten her supper the previous evening, choosing to save it for this moment.

"Here, Neph. I brought you something to eat!"

Changing Star received the bundle with a faint smile and lingered a little before saying:

"Thank you. Uh... do you guys want breakfast?"

With that, she walked over to a flimsy wooden table that stood near one of the walls and removed a piece of cloth from it. Beneath, there was a pile of juicy roasted meat.

It was sizable enough to feed ten people in the castle for a day or two.

Sunny stared at the meat blankly, then moved his eyes to stare at Nephis.

"...Where the hell did you get all this meat? We thought you would be starving here in the outer settlement!"

She touched her hair in embarrassment.

"Oh... a few nights ago, a big monster came from the road. I and a few other people managed to kill it. This is my share of the spoils."

Cassie opened her eyes wide.

"But I thought that Gunlaug's men were supposed to fight off Nightmare Creatures!"

Changing Star remained silent for a few seconds.

"They do if the castle is attacked, either from the slopes of the hill or from the sky. If the monsters come from the road, they usually don't bother to do anything."

...So that's why all the nearby hovels were empty. Who would want to live in the direct path of attacking Nightmare Creatures, especially since people who were supposed to fight them weren't going to move a finger to help?

Sunny smiled darkly.

'That's the glorious Castle Guard for you. Wait...'

He blinked, then glared at Nephis.

"If that is true, then why on Earth... uh, Dream Realm... would you choose to live in this pit, of all places?!"

She stared at him for a while, then said in a flat tone:

"It's quiet here."

Then, a small smile appeared on Neph's lips. Turning to a window, she added:

"I like it."

Chapter 148: Last Harvest | Shadow Slave

Behind the window, a striking vista of the cursed city sprawled far below. The morning sun washed the ruins in a pale light, making them look menacingly mysterious.

Nephis smiled.

"Besides... what can compete with this killer view?"

As though answering her words, a ghastly wail resounded from somewhere far away, echoing in the wind like a dying scream. Sunny trembled.

'I guess she meant it literally.'

With a sigh, he put Changing Star's strange choice of habitat at the back of his mind and approached the pile of meat.

"Let's eat first."

The three of them sat on the stone floor and ate monster meat, passing around Cassie's beautiful glass bottle between each other. It was just like the good old times, provided that those times were not actually that old, and there had certainly not been anything good about them.

Almost.

When all three of them were satiated, Nephis looked at Sunny with calm intensity. For some reason, he was reminded of the unseen waves of pressure that Gunlaug created anywhere he went.

"What have you learned in the castle?"

He sighed. This was going to be a long conversation.

Sunny started by describing the general order of things in the ancient stronghold. He told Neph about the six different castes and the complex

relationships that existed between them, as well as briefly explaining how the members of each caste lived their lives. Sometimes, Cassie would add a few details of her own.

Changing Star frowned.

"Wait... did you say that there were five hundred people living in the castle?"

Sunny gave her a nod.

"Yes, somewhere around that. Why?"

She thought for a bit, then said:

"That doesn't make sense. There are almost as many people here in the outer settlement, perhaps even more. That would put the human population of the Dark City at around a thousand. Most of them are fairly young, too — which would mean that each year, hundreds upon hundreds of us are sent to the Forgotten Shore, with most somehow managing to survive and reach the Bright Castle."

She paused.

"But I haven't seen a single Sleeper of our crop here in the slum. As far as I know, we three are the only ones to come to the Dark City after the recent solstice."

Sunny scratched the back of his head and said with reluctance:

"Actually, it's four. Caster is also here. He's living comfortably in the castle."

Nephis suddenly grew strangely animated.

"Caster of the Han Li clan? He is here?"

'No need to be so enthusiastic, damn it!'

Sunny tried not to grimace.

"Yeah. He had been here pretty much this entire time. Actually, Caster had told us that there were only seven Sleepers sent to the Forgotten Shore by the Spell this year. Strange, I know."

He paused for a few moments, and then added:

"Truth be told, I noticed this discrepancy as well. But there is an explanation. You see, there seems to be a pattern to how many people the Spell sends here. Fifteen years ago, when a bunch of crazy humans first laid claim to the castle, there would be just a dozen or so newcomers each year. Then a few dozen. Then a hundred. In the past few years, it was several hundred each time."

Sunny gestured at the three of them.

"Until this year, that is, when mere seven Sleepers arrived. Since the Spell is obsessed with the number seven, some people believe that this marks the end of a fourteen-year long cycle and the first year of a new one. I think it's plausible."

Changing Star thought for a bit, then asked:

"How does Caster know the total number of new arrivals?"

That was a good question, naturally. One that Sunny had asked himself many times before finally convincing himself to go find the handsome Legacy and ask him directly.

"There's an Artisan in the castle with a weird type of revelation Ability. She can trace the general location of everyone a person had ever met. Caster paid her a bunch of soul shards to check if any of his acquaintances made it to the Forgotten Shore. She told him there were six."

Nephis was silent for a few moments, then simply said:

"Continue."

Sunny did. He briefly mentioned the main points of everything he had been able to learn, including all the vile crap he had to witness and his own thoughts on how things worked under the pristine white surface of the magnificent fortress. Inevitably, he had to describe how ingenious and unassailable Bright Lord's hold over the Dark City was.

Cassie grew pale and quiet during his somber account. Changing Star's face grew darker and darker with each word. When he told her about the travesty of a trial that ended with Jubei's harrowing death and shared his own thoughts on how powerful the Host truly was, the corners of her mouth turned downward.

Finally, he came to the conclusion:

"...and that is why Gunlaug can never be defeated. He controls every facet of life here, both material and abstract. Food, shelter, hope, fear... everything comes under the purview of his authority, and his authority is absolute. Even power itself is his to give and take. Out here, Gunlaug might as well be considered a god."

Nephis remained silent for a long time, and then quietly said:

"He is not a god. He is just an impostor."

Sunny chuckled.

"In this hell... is there a difference?"

She glanced at him sharply and gritted her teeth.

After a few minutes spent in tense silence, Neph suddenly said:

"Still. That only explains why Gunlug can't be overthrown in a rebellion. Why didn't anyone simply kill him in his sleep? Why didn't one of his lieutenants stage a coup? After all, this is how tyrants usually end — by the hand of their most trusted ally."

Sunny smiled darkly.

"Ah, well. That is because up until now, I only told you about his power as a ruler. Which is, by all accounts, nothing short of terrifying. But his personal power?"

He shivered, then added in a hoarse voice:

"It's way, way worse."

Chapter 149: Dark Diver | Shadow Slave

Sunny was silent for a while, then sighed:

"Do you remember how Effie told us that he might as well be considered immortal? Well, she wasn't wrong. Apart from the fact that Gunlaug has probably absorbed more Soul Essence and has more experience fighting both Nightmare Creature and Awakened than anyone else on the Forgotten Shore... there's more to him than that."

Nephis frowned.

"Is his Aspect Ability uniquely powerful?"

Sunny shook his head.

"His Aspect Ability is that he is able to breathe and move with incredible speed underwater. But it is connected to what I am about to tell you."

He hesitated.

"You see, Gunlaug came to the Dark City around eight years ago. Since his Ability was of no use in the ruins, he quickly became an outcast. From what I was able to learn, things were even darker in the Castle back then. Strength decided everything, and anyone without strength wasn't even considered to be human."

Sunny shuddered. He could imagine it vividly.

This was, by far, the most cruel and bloody time in the history of the Bright Castle. Right after the last member of the original cohort to conquer the ancient stronghold had perished and before Gunlaug took control, things balanced at the edge of madness for a while.

Say what you want about the bastard, but at least he kept the humans here from turning into animals... completely.

Sunny continued:

"But Gunlaug, he turned out to be mad even by those standards. Because he actually began to hunt in the dark sea."

Changing Star blinked.

"What?"

He nodded.

"Yes. At dusk, he would dive from the city wall into the black water to scavenge the soul shards from the monsters of the Labyrinth that were crushed by the flood, racing against the approaching horrors of the depths. And at dawn, he would dive into the retreating sea to scavenge meat from the remains of creatures that the dwellers of the depths had killed and left behind."

Nephis silently stared at him. They had met the abominable existences that hid beneath the black surface of the cursed sea twice, and each of these harrowing meetings had left scars on their souls and minds. To do so twice a day, every day... Gunlaug was indeed a madman.

But he was also somewhat of a mad genius.

Sunny took a deep breath.

"And this is how he turned from a desperate outcast into the Bright Lord. One day, Gunlaug was pulled away by a current and, once the sea disappeared, stumbled onto a mortally wounded, dying leviathan. The creature was still alive, but just barely. Knowing that the carrion eaters of the Labyrinth will soon come to feast on it, Gunlaug began cutting the meat of the creature's bones with his knife."

He paused, then said in a strangely dark voice:

"By chance, the leviathan happened to die from its terrible wounds at that exact moment. And since Gunlaug's blade was the last thing to cut it, the Spell happened to attribute the kill to him. And that kill... that kill

happened to give him a Memory. A wondrous golden armor that no human weapon can even scratch."

No one really knew a lot about the dwellers of the depths, but Sunny and Nephis had once witnessed two carapace centurions retrieve two Transcendent souls shards from the carcass of one of them. Which meant that Gunlaug's armor-type Memory was at least three ranks above the soul cores of every human on the Forgotten Shore.

Almost every weapon-type Memory they possessed was either of Dormant or Awakened rank. Even if someone managed to kill a Fallen creature and acquire an Ascended weapon from it, the weapon would most likely still be ineffective against the Transcendent armor. And since that damn armor didn't have any openings...

Basically, Gunlaug was invincible.

Sunny sighed.

"With that armor, he returned to the Dark City, gathered a few supporters, killed everyone who stood in his way, and took control of the Castle. No one was able to threaten his reign ever since. And all those who tried... well. Their skulls are out there for everyone to see, swinging on chains above the gates of the castle."

Nephis remained silent for a long time, staring at the floor. She seemed to be a bit disheartened. Finally, she asked:

"What traits does the armor possess?"

He shrugged.

"Who knows? It's not like anyone who had the opportunity to learn that lived to tell the tale. The only thing widely known about the golden armor is that it is made out of some strange liquid metal and that it emanates a field of crushing psychic pressure. But even that is not entirely true. Actually, it only affects those who look at their reflection in the visor. Cassie wasn't affected at all."

The blind girl raised an eyebrow, only now learning that everyone except for her always felt incredibly oppressed in Gunlaug's presence. For once, her terrible Flaw gave her an advantage.

It had also allowed Sunny to learn a valuable secret. But he had no time to be happy about it.

The most important part of this conversation was drawing close. He had to convince Changing Star to abandon any idea of going against Gunlaug. Otherwise, all three of them were going to end up dead.

Sunny looked at her and asked in a carefully neutral tone:

"So, what do you think?"

Changing Star was quiet for a while, then suddenly said:

"I have also learned something while you were gone."

Sunny frowned slightly. Was she trying to avoid this conversation? Feeling heavy and uncertain, he asked:

"Really? What is it?"

However, in the next second, he had forgotten all about his previous worries. Because Nephis looked him right in the eyes and said:

"There is a Gateway here, after all."

Something exploded in Sunny's mind.

'What... there is... there is a Gateway?'

Stunned, he stared at Neph with wide eyes.

How could this be? Why hadn't anyone ever mentioned it? No, it didn't make any sense. If there was a Gateway, why would people just stay in the Dark City? Why were both Effie and Caster so adamant that there was no way out?

A familiar dark feeling of unease settled in his heart.

Trying to compose himself, Sunny slowly said:

"Then why... why hasn't anyone left? Where is it?"

Nephis looked at the window, remained silent for a few moments, and then answered in a flat tone:

"Where do you think? It's in the Crimson Spire, of course."

Chapter 150: Hunting Party | Shadow Slave

The Crimson Spire... that eerie and everpresent shadow that had hunted him all this time. The cyclopean tower that stood at the center of the Labyrinth, or maybe was the source of it, emanating a harrowing sense of foreboding.

The background for the last part of Cassie's vision.

Of course, the damn Gateway just had to be in that damn spire!

Sunny sighed.

This was unwelcomed, but not unexpected news. After all, Inspector Rock did warn them that, should they ever find themselves in a region of the Dream Realm without an established human Citadel, they should look for the Gateway either around or inside the most prominent landmark there.

The Crimson Spire loomed over the entire Forgotten Shore like an axis connecting heaven to earth. It was hard to imagine anything more prominent. Ever since Cassie had first told them about it, deep down, Sunny always suspected that they were going to end up having to enter that creepy tower at some point.

After the revelation that there was no Gateway in the human castle, that suspicion only grew stronger.

But, wait. There was something else that Instructor Rock had told them...

'Work together to defeat the Gateway guardians... wasn't these his words? So who is guarding the Crimson Spire?'

Glancing at Nephis, he asked darkly:

"So what is inside the Spire? I gather that it's not something pleasant. Otherwise, there wouldn't be a thousand Sleepers choosing to live in a city full of vicious monsters instead of going there."

Changing Star nodded. Without changing her expression, she looked away and answered:

"A Fallen Terror."

Sunny's heart skipped a bit.

A Fallen Terror — the Nightmare Creature one whole class above the dreaded tyrants, with six mighty soul cores providing it with profane power — would certainly do the trick.

"So, going there is suicide."

No amount of Sleepers could ever hope to defeat a Fallen Terror. The possibility of surviving such an encounter, let alone emerging victorious, was zero. It was even less probable than breaking through Gunlaug's indestructible armor.

Impossible.

He chuckled. What irony! To not only be trapped in this hell, but also be forced to stare at the path to freedom every day, knowing that you'll never be able to reach it. That... that was such a cruel torture. Sunny would even go as far as to say that it was a type of hell in and of itself.

No wonder the Tower of Dusk was so unpopular. Living there would simply drive some people insane.

They were really, truly stuck here forever.

Nephis sighed.

"The first ruler of the Bright Castle led a large expedition to find a way out of the Labyrinth. They all perished. The second ruler — the last member of the original cohort — tried to reach the Gateway instead. They all died, too. After that, no one tried to find a way out anymore."

The three of them remained silent for a long time, their mood grim and somber. Now that they had a chance to spend some time in the small human

enclave on the Forgotten Shore and gather information, there were no more excuses to deny it. Everything that Effie had told them was true.

They were going to spend the rest of their lives here... however long that might be.

Sunny sighed, then looked at Changing Star.

"So... what's the plan?"

Nephis looked at the vista of the ruined city through the window. Sunny was sure that she had already thought a lot about their future. He just hoped that her thoughts were not too crazy.

After a while, she said:

"We will create a hunting party."

...Not too bad. Despite the fact that becoming independent hunters was going to be a long and perilous journey, it was at least achievable. They just had to be smart and careful about it.

He scratched the back of his head:

"Going into the Dark City blind will be very dangerous."

Nephis shrugged, then turned to face him:

"You are right. We will need to recruit a pathfinder."

Someone who was already experienced and could teach them the ropes... that would certainly speed things along and make the whole process safer. Good thinking.

"Do you have someone in mind?"

She gave him a nod.

"As a matter of fact, I do. We will go see her later. But first..."

Her eyes gleamed with intensity.

"...Tell me every detail of what you have learned in the castle. Every name, every Aspect. Every Ability and Flaw you've been able to glean. Every grievance people have and every agenda they're hiding. I need to know it all."

Sunny smiled.

"Sure, no problem. But be warned, this is going to take a while. I've been very busy snooping around, you know."

For the first time since receiving his Aspect, Sunny had been able to do what he had planned to do from the start — gather information without risking his hide, as a real spy should. After months of bloody battles and open confrontations, It was strangely rewarding.

Changing Star gave him a nod.

"There's no hurry."

Several hours later, Sunny was finishing his winding report, his voice hoarse from all the talking:

"...is actually the same Pathfinder who the hunter from the outer settlement, Jubei, accused of using another human as monster bait. A real nasty fellow. He is an incredibly formidable fighter and is good at his job, but his personal habits... well. The man is a degenerate gambler. He spends all his shards in Aiko's gambling den, then refuses to pay and hurts anyone who dares to object."

He took a breath, then added angrily:

"Some people even say that this whole challenge happened because he wanted to hunt a powerful monster and pay off a part of his gambling debt. The bastard."

Then, Sunny thought for a while, scratched his head, and said:

"Uh... I think that covers pretty much everything. Of course, there are a lot of things I wasn't able to learn at all."

Nephis was in deep thought, digesting the mountain of information that Sunny had thrown at her. Her face was cold and distant.

Feeling that her friend wasn't going to react, Cassie patted him on the shoulder, smiled, and said:

"You've done a very good job, Sunny! This is amazing."

He blinked and looked aside, slightly embarrassed.

"Well... of course it is. That is what my Aspect is actually for, remember? The whole monster-slaying thing is nothing but an unfortunate misuse of my talents, honestly."

'Yeah... I would much prefer to stay hidden somewhere safe and let my shadow do all the work.'

The shadow slightly turned its head and threw a menacing look his way. It was not amused.

Sunny smiled, then looked at Nephis.

"So... who is the pathfinder you want to recruit? There can't be a lot of experienced hunters in the outer settlement, right? And each of them must have their hunting party already. How are we going to persuade one to join us?"

Changing Star lingered, then said in a strangely tense voice:

"Yes. Everyone who is worth something has their own party — except for one person. But persuading her won't be easy."

She sighed, then added:

"Actually, you already know her. It's Effie."

Chapter 151: Head Hunting | Shadow Slave

Some time later, they were standing in front of a makeshift cabin. Just like Changing Star's patchwork dwelling, the cabin was constructed out of mismatched stone blocks that had been scavenged from the ruins. It was reinforced with monster hides here and there and seemed to be built slightly better than the rest of the hovels in the outer settlement.

There was a large bestial skull hung above the door, its thick forehead split apart by a devastating strike of some sharp weapon.

Glancing at the skull, Nephis took a step forward and knocked on the door. However, no response followed.

Sunny sighed.

"Maybe she's not home."

Instead of an answer, Changing Star frowned and banged on the door with her first. The first strike was somewhat gentle, but by the last, the bestial skull was on the verge of flying off the wall.

A sleepy and irritated voice sounded from the inside:

"I swear to gods, whoever you are, you'd better be a Nightmare Creature!"

A few moments later, Sunny heard the sound of footsteps approaching the door. Before it opened, though, Nephis suddenly spoke:

"Sunny, turn away."

Hearing a strange urgency in her voice, he scowled and did as she had asked.

"Your shadow, too."

'What is going on? Are we expecting trouble?'

As he was staring away from the cabin, the creaking of wood informed him that the door was flung open.

"Who the hell is... oh. It's you."

He swore he could hear Neph's teeth grinding against each other. A few seconds later, Changing Star spoke, her tone especially flat:

"...Put on a Memory, Effie. Please."

'Wait... what?'

Why would she... oh...

Oh!

When he was finally allowed to turn back, the last glimmers of ethereal light were yet to disappear from the fabric of Effie's provocatively short chiton. She wasn't wearing anything underneath, either.

"Here. Better?"

The huntress was exactly the same as the last time he had seen her — tall, strong, and brimming with vitality. Without the bronze cuirass with leather pteruges, as well as other elements of the archaic armor, even more of her dewy olive skin could be seen.

"So, you guys are back together, huh? Judging by how clean and shiny the other two look, I'm guessing that their stay in the Castle was pleasant?"

Sunny glanced at Cassie, then said in a reserved tone:

"Not particularly. Just like you said, the ambiance there is... well... an acquired taste, I guess."

Effie grinned.

"Well said! Anyway, how can I help you?"

Changing Star motioned at the door.

"Can we come inside?"

The unruly huntress glanced back, then shrugged.

"Sure. Why not?"

Inside, the cabin was small and cozy. One of its corners was occupied by a large pile of furs that served Effie as a bed. At first glance, it didn't seem that lavish, but once it hit Sunny that each of the furs had come from the corpse of a Nightmare Creature, he quickly changed his mind.

That was probably the most extravagant thing he had ever seen.

Also... one could only imagine what went on between those furs...

'Pure thoughts, Sunny! Focus!'

There was also a fireplace, a table with a single wooden chair, and a pair of sturdy chests. The rest of the space was occupied by various curios that the huntress had scavenged from the ruins over the years. There was no particular logic to this opulent collection except for the fact that each object had once caught her fancy for this reason or that.

After the three of them were seated, Effie returned to her pile of furs, wrapped herself in one of them and asked:

"So, what's so important that you had to come and wake me up this early in the morning?"

'Early in the morning? It's already noon!'

Nephis lingered for a few moments, then said:

"You haven't hunted since the day we met. Right?"

Effie yawned, then said in a languid tone:

"Nope. I'll go back into the ruins once my food runs out. Which will be in a day or two, I think."

What... how? The amount of meat she had butchered off those monsters was enough to feed a person for a couple of months. It was all gone already? Just how much did the vigorous huntress eat?!

Changing Star nodded.

"When you do, come with us. Be our pathfinder."

'Well... she certainly doesn't beat around the bush.'

For some reason, Sunny had not expected Neph to be this direct. He had always imagined this conversation taking much longer before getting to its real purpose.

Effie stared at them, then threw her head back and laughed out loud.

"Ah, that's a good one! Do you want me to be your nanny, too?"

When her laughter died down, she shook her head and said:

"No offense, kids, but you have just arrived in the Dark City. You are as green as it gets. Best hunters out here wanted me to become a part of their party, and I refused them all. Do you know why?"

Neph nodded with a serious expression.

"Most hunting parties share the spoils of their hunts. Each hunter keeps a part to eat and sells the rest to the people in the slum. But because of your Flaw, you can't allow yourself to do the same. You need all the sustenance a hunt can provide. The more partners you have, the lesser your share will become, so... you hunt alone, and never sell the meat of your prey, just their hides."

Effie smiled.

"I see someone has been doing their homework."

Changing Star tilted her head a little and, not paying any attention to the irony in those words, continued:

"We can solve that problem by..."

However, the solitary huntress interrupted her:

"Stop. Good guess, but you are wrong. That is not why I refused all those hunters."

Nephis blinked, surprised. After a long pause, she asked, a hint of confusion in her voice:

"Then... why?"

The smile disappeared from Effie's face.

"Because they are weak. Every one of them is weak. Even the most successful of them are. And do you know why?"

Something dark gleamed in her hazel eyes.

"They are weak because Gunlaug will never allow anyone strong to exist outside of his control. So... I am not going to be your pathfinder. Sorry, princess."

Changing Star froze, obviously flustered by that answer. She opened her mouth to say something, then closed it again and awkwardly pressed her lips together.

No matter how much she had honed her social skills during their journey through the Labyrinth, this conversation still seemed to be too much for her.

In the ensuing silence, Sunny suddenly spoke, his voice calm and slightly provoking:

"He's allowing you to exist."

Effie looked at him, raised one eyebrow with a smile, and didn't say anything.

Finally, Nephis was able to compose herself:

"We might be new here, but we are not weak. Between the two of us, Sunny and I had killed dozens upon dozens of Awakened creatures in the Labyrinth..."

The huntress interrupted her once again:

"Even if that's true, that was there. Out here in the Dark City, things are very different."

The two of them stared at each other, one with a relaxed smile on her lips, the other with stubborn flames burning in her eyes.

'Oh, I don't like this...'

Eventually, Changing Star grimaced and said:

"So, if we prove that we have strength, you might reconsider?"

Effie chuckled.

"Damn! You say it like it's easy. You do know how many people can't even step a foot into the ruins, right? If you guys survive in this hell for a few years, maybe then we can talk again."

Nephis looked at her for a while, and then smiled darkly.

"We will talk again in the evening. Then, you will change your mind."

Chapter 152: There And Back Again

Outside, the sun was already moving past its zenith. There wasn't that much time left before the sunset, so Sunny was really unsure about what Nephis could do to change Effie's mind before evening. However, judging by the determined expression on her face, Changing Star wasn't just throwing words to the wind. She had something specific in mind.

He hesitated.

"So, uh... what exactly are we going to do now?"

Neph glanced at him, white flames dancing in the depths of her cold grey eyes. Then, she turned away and said:

"Follow me."

With that, she walked forward in the direction of the castle.

'Castle? Why are we going to the castle?'

Somewhat uneasy, Sunny gently took Cassie by the arm and hurried to catch up to Nephis. When he did, she suddenly threw over her shoulder:

"Tell me about that Pathfinder again. The one who was accused of murder three days ago."

Sunny frowned, then repeated what he knew about the guy. When he was almost finished, she asked:

"What's his Aspect Ability?"

He hesitated, then said:

"He can make any weapon become incredibly sharp when it's in his hands. Sharp enough to cut stone, maybe even steel. It's a very powerful combat Ability."

Changing Star was quiet for some time, then said:

"What about his Flaw?"

Sunny shook his head.

"That I have no idea about. People are very protective of their Flaws, you know. Not everyone goes around telling everyone about their greatest vulnerability like that lunatic, Effie."

Cassie, who seemed to be very protective of him today, decided to support this claim:

"Sunny is right, Neph. We don't even know what his own Flaw is, remember?"

Sunny almost stumbled and had to try very hard to not let any emotion show on his face.

Cassie was right, of course. While Changing Star and she had shared their Flaws with him, Sunny never reciprocated the gesture... for obvious reasons.

'That is true, but... uh, can we not talk about that?'

Nephis silently nodded and didn't comment on it further. It seemed as though her mind was on something else.

'Phew...'

Soon, they scaled the magnificent stairs and were approaching the gates of the castle. Sunny was growing increasingly nervous about Neph's intentions.

'What is her plan, exactly?'

"Uh... Neph? What do you need us to do?"

She shrugged, then said in her usual indifferent tone:

"You don't really need to do anything. Just follow me and try to look... uh... virtuous."

'Look... virtuous? What does that suppose to mean?!'

The Guards standing watch in front of the gates blocked their path with contemptuous and suggestive looks in their eyes.

Contempt was directed toward Sunny, while the rest was directed toward the girls, of course.

"Stop! What business do you have in the Bright Castle? Want to pay the tribute?"

"Or maybe want to get paid, instead? If you know what I mean..."

Both of them laughed, making Sunny's blood boil.

Nephis looked at them with a calm expression, then said:

"I want to go inside, but I'm not going to pay tribute."

The laughter suddenly stopped. The Guards looked at them with a bit of amusement, a harsh and dangerous light finding its way into their eyes.

"Have you lost your mind, wench? Why are you here if you're not going to pay tribute? Stop wasting our time!"

Changing Star stared at them with no emotion whatsoever showing on her beautiful ivory face. Then, she said evenly:

"I'm here to invoke the Right of Challenge."

For a few seconds, everyone stayed silent. Sunny's heart was beating like a wild beast in his chest.

'Mad! She has gone mad!'

But no, Changing Star was not mad. Although Sunny liked to joke inwardly about how crazy Nephis was, she was anything but. In fact, her ability to remain cool-headed and rational in any situation was one of the main reasons that made her so dangerous. Which meant that there was some opportunity she saw here that he didn't.

At least he hoped that this was the case.

Meanwhile, one of the Guards frowned:

"Stop joking around, little girl. Shut your mouth and get lost if you want to live."

Neph didn't move. Instead, she said:

"I'm not joking."

The other Guard stared at her, then shook his head:

"Those slum rats have really all gone crazy, huh? I thought that this recent show would teach them a lesson, but it seems as though it did not."

He sneered.

"Listen, lass. The Right of Challenge is not a laughing matter. It's a fight to the death. No one is going to go easy on you just because you have a pretty face. Do you understand?"

Changing Star simply nodded.

The Guard waited for a while, looking at her tall figure and the crude tunic that she wore. Then, he grimaced.

"I guess we'll have some entertainment today! Ugh, such a shame. With your looks, you could have lived in the castle without ever even needing to pay the tribute."

Shaking his head, he turned around and gestured for the three of them to follow. The other Guard stayed behind, a bewildered and darkly excited

expression on his face.

With the sound of the rusty chains swinging in the wind invading their ears, Sunny, Nephis and Cassie passed beneath the hanging skulls and entered the castle.

Inside, everything was exactly the same. Even Harper was still sitting behind his opulent desk, writing something on a piece of parchment. Hearing the sound of footsteps, he raised his head and threw a furtive glance in their direction.

An expression of confused surprise appeared in his eyes.

"Uh... Sunless and Cassia? What are you guys doing back here?"

Sunny felt the desire to palm his face.

When he had said to the gaunt young man that they might see each other in the future... he certainly did not mean that that future would be on the same damn day!

Not knowing about the thoughts raging in his head, Harper smiled:

"Oh! Did you guys get lucky and come into some shards? Back already to pay the tribute?"

Sunny gritted his teeth and forced out a weak smile.

"Uh, no. Not exactly..."

Chapter 153: Guiding Star | Shadow Slave

By the time the three of them were led to the grand hall of the castle, the news that there was going to be another challenge had yet to spread through the entire fortress. Because of that, there was no crowd there, just a few dozen people who had happened to walk past and heard the commotion. However, their number was growing with each minute.

Standing before the entrance to the hall, Nephis was calmly looking forward, her thoughts a mystery. She seemed to be steady and collected. Sunny, on the other hand, was very nervous.

Just what was Changing Star planning?

Glancing around to make sure that no one could eavesdrop on their conversation, he leaned to her and whispered:

"You're not really going to fight one of Gunlaug's lieutenants, are you?"

Because that would be suicide. No matter how talented and strong Neph was, she couldn't hope to win against someone like that, at least not before absorbing enough soul shards to even the odds at least a little. Those people had not gotten to where they were by pure accident, too.

They had talents of their own.

Nephis didn't turn her head and simply said:

"...The walls have ears."

Sunny gritted his teeth and was about to retort, but at that moment, the Guard that had led them inside appeared from the grand hall, threw a dark look at them, and spat:

"Come on in, fools."

Changing Star simply walked forward, leaving Sunny and Cassie no choice but to follow.

Inside the hall, a small crowd of people was staring at the entrance. When they saw Nephis, a wave of confused whispers ran through their ranks.

"Who is that?"

"Never seen her before."

"There's something strange about that girl..."

The whole situation was much less ostentatious and theatrical than that on the day of Jubei's death. Most of the lieutenants weren't even here, not to mention the Bright Lord himself. Only the leader of Hunters, Gemma, was sitting on the steps leading up to the empty white throne. On his face, there was a slightly sullen expression.

To Sunny's relief, Harus was nowhere to be seen.

When the Guard led the three of them inside, Gemma raised his head and glanced in their direction with a frown.

"Did I hear it correctly? One of you three wants to invoke the Right of Challenge?"

Nephis took a step forward, looked him right in the eyes, and answered in her usual indifferent voice:

"I do."

Her calmness was in direct contradiction with the heavy meaning behind those words. It was the polar opposite of the impassioned, scornful, furious speech of condemnation that Jubei had given in this hall three days ago. The confused frown on Gemma's face deepened.

"You do know what that means, right, little girl?"

She continued to stare at him without showing any sign of fear, then repeated:

"I do."

The tall Hunter sighed.

"Listen... it is indeed true that anyone has the right to invoke the Right of Challenge. But throwing your life away is a really stupid thing to do. I'm sure that you had to suffer a lot to make it this far. Everyone here did, pretty much. So how about you think about it some more and reconsider?"

His voice wasn't unfriendly. In fact, it seemed sincere, as though Gunlaug's lieutenant really did not want to see her die for no reason. However, his words fell on deaf ears. Neph just tilted her head a little and said:

"No need."

Gemma sighed again, then shook his head.

"Fine, have it your way then. Who are you here to accuse?"

Sunny already had the idea. That's why he wasn't surprised to hear her next words:

"I am here to accuse the Pathfinder known as Andel."

Andel was the person whose crime had led to Jubei's challenge, and then death.

As another wave of whispers rose from the crowd, Gemma blinked. With an unhappy scowl on his face, he said:

"As I've told the last time, I am the leader of both Hunters and Pathfinders. Any crime they commit while performing their duties is my crime, so I will be the one to answer for it. Are you sure you want to challenge me, kid?"

Sunny held his breath, knowing that Neph's next words would decide their fates.

Despite the older man's heavy tone, she did not even flinch. However, she did pierce him with a cold gaze, then slowly shook her head.

"I'm not here to accuse him of murdering the young man from the outer settlement. I'm here to accuse him of theft. Andel has lost a considerable amount of soul shards while gambling, but refused to pay. That is stealing. Since it was done on his private time and not while performing any official duties, you have nothing to do with it."

Gemma stared at her, a bewildered look written clearly on his face.

Sunny was doing the same.

'Well, that was... unexpected. Kind of ingenious, actually. Who knew Neph can be so crafty?'

By shifting the accusation from a crime committed during a hunt to a misdemeanor that had nothing to do with Andel's role as a Pathfinder, she effectively prevented any of the lieutenants from fighting on his behalf. At least if they remained true to their claim of being just.

But was a seasoned Pathfinder any less of a threat than one of Gunlaug's proxies?

And would Gemma even allow a challenge like that to proceed?

As though responding to his questions, the tall Hunter raised his eyebrows and said in disbelief:

"What? A... a gambling debt? You want to... did Aiko send you?"

Nephis shook her head again.

"No. I've never even met her."

Everyone in the grand hall looked at her as though she was insane. The charismatic lieutenant was no exception. With some exasperation finding its way into his voice, he asked:

"If you don't even know the person Andel owes the shards, why are you here challenging him on her behalf?!"

Neph simply shrugged.

"Do I need to personally know the victim of the crime to punish the criminal?"

Gemma stared, clearly finding the whole situation ridiculous.

"...It's just a gambling debt. I can pay the shards myself, and we all can.."

However, Changing Star interrupted him. Her voice was still inexplicably calm and even:

"It's not about shards. It's about justice... and law. After all, the law is our only guiding star in this dark world. Without its light, there's only darkness."

Her words echoed in the grand hall and put a grim expression on Gemma's face. By repeating what Gunlaug had said here a few days prior, she left him with little choice but to satisfy the request for a challenge.

After all, going against it would be tantamount to going against the Bright Lord's will.

'How devious! Did she learn that from me?'

The Hunter looked away with regret, remained silent for some time, and then said to one of the Guards in a dark tone:

"Go and bring Andel here. Tell that bastard that after he kills this stupid girl, he and I will have a long conversation about his... life choices."

Then, he glanced at Neph and said:

"And you... say your goodbyes and prepare for battle. Oh, right. What is your name? Tell us. That way, you will at least be remembered."

Looking him right in the eyes, Nephis stayed quiet for a bit, and then answered.

Her clear voice resounded loudly in the grand hall:

"I am Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan."

Suddenly, everything became silent.

Chapter 154: Light Of The Seven

Everyone grew quiet. Even Gemma seemed to be slightly stunned by that proclamation. The only person to not react to it at all was Caster, who had entered the grand hall a bit earlier and was now standing by one of the walls, watching Nephis with a complex expression.

Her full name was shocking to hear for two entirely different, but equally earth-shattering reasons.

Firstly, she had called herself not by a human name, but by a True one. In the entire history of human civilization, only a handful of Awakened had managed to earn a True Name in their First Nightmare. Needless to say, none of them was among the thousand Sleepers currently trapped on the Forgotten Shore.

Even Gunlaug himself did not have one.

But Nephis did.

...And Sunny too, of course, but no one had to know that.

Secondly, she had announced herself to be a Legacy, and not just any Legacy at that, but one from the legendary Immortal Flame clan. A clan that had been responsible for propelling the entire human species forward not once, but twice — first by helping conquer the Second Nightmare, then the Third.

A combination of these facts was enough to set off a metaphorical explosion in the middle of the Dark City. If this was true, then she could be considered to be an almost messianic existence here on the Forgotten Shore.

Suddenly, the calmness with which she dared to challenge a fearsome Pathfinder to a battle to the death did not seem that strange.

The dazed looks in the eyes of all the Sleepers gathered in the grand hall had slowly begun to give place to a subtle, tentative, weak glow.

It was as though a tiny seed of hope was suddenly planted in the dead soil of their lightless, forlorn souls.

Either by accident or on purpose, Nephis chose that exact moment to summon her armor. Numerous sparks of light surrounded her in a whirlpool of soft radiance, and when they were gone, a striking black and white armor had appeared on her graceful body.

Everyone's eyes were immediately glued to the symbol on its breastplate. On it, seven shining stars were intricately engraved into the strange white metal.

"Th—that symbol!"

"It's Starlight Crest!"

"The crest of the Seven!"

Just like Sunny, many of the inhabitants of the Bright Castle were familiar with the symbol of the seven stars. Not only was it carved into the robe of the giant statue standing in front of the impregnable city wall, it was also often depicted in numerous stone carvings decorating the walls of the ancient fortress.

It seemed to represent the seven heroes that had once vowed to vanquish the darkness consuming this cursed land... and lead its people back into the light.

Sunny felt cold sweat running down his spine.

'What... what is she doing? Is it all a coincidence, or did Nephis plan everything? Does she not understand how these fools will react to such theatrics? If they get the wrong idea and start running their mouths about how she is some sort of a heavenly savior, Gunlaug will soon come knocking on our doors!'

What did Neph say? Just follow her lead and try to look virtuous?

Sunny stared at her back, stumped. How would he even do that? There had never been a single drop of virtue in his entire body!

Meanwhile, Gemma had finally managed to compose himself and threw an evaluating look at Changing Star. If there had been nothing but neglect and disregard in his eyes before, now there was a hint of dark wariness in them.

Slowly, the leader of Hunters smiled.

"Ah. In that case, nice to meet you. I must say, it's a very impressive name you have there. Makes one wonder where it came from."

The implication behind these words was easy to understand. Gemma was insinuating that Nephis was lying.

It seemed as though this insinuation had removed a veil from everyone's eyes. Most people quickly lost their wistful expressions, once again looking at her either somberly or with dark anticipation. Only now, there were also hints of mocking disdain on some of their faces.

...And yet, several of them were still staring at her with expressions full of hesitant, timid faith.

Changing Star did not react to any of that in any way. She simply remained calm and indifferent.

As though she existed slightly apart from the dirt and despair of this world.

Soon, Andel the Pathfinder was led into the grand hall.

The Pathfinder was of average height and solid build, with menacing blue eyes and a sharp jaw. His head was shaved on the sides, with the remaining hair weaved into a short braid. He appeared to be slightly older than the rest of the Sleepers gathered in the grand hall, with the exception of Gemma himself. Andel was probably around twenty-four years old.

He looked like a skilled, seasoned, and ruthless fighter. Every Pathfinder was nothing less than an elite among elites, and he was no exception. Even those who hated Andel stared at him with fear and respect, even veneration.

Entering the hall, Andel threw a dark look at Nephis and walked forward to the base of the steps leading to the white throne. There, he stopped and bowed, showing his respect to the leader of Hunters.

"I'm here."

Gemma stared at him with an irritated, contemptuous expression, and then sighed.

"You know why I've summoned you?"

The Pathfinder smirked.

"Some wench wants to challenge me? Good. I was very sad to let Harus have all the fun last time."

Several angry whispers sounded from the crowd, but no one dared to reveal their hatred toward the arrogant murderer openly.

The corner of Gemma's mouth turned downward. He remained silent for some time, and then said in a dangerous tone:

"Fun? Did you say fun? Well, Andel, if you lacked excitement in your life, you should have just told me. How about this? After you kill that girl, I will show you what real fun is."

With that, he gestured to the Guards that the fight could begin. Andel frowned a little, but then turned around with a dark smile on his lips.

Sunny and Cassie were led to the side, where they joined the crowd of spectating Sleepers. By that point, there was a considerable amount of them gathered in the grand hall.

Everyone looked at the fearsome Pathfinder and Nephis with a mix of tension and anticipation. Some were here just to see a macabre show,

waiting with excitement for blood to flow. To them, it didn't matter who lived and who died, although none believed that the girl from the outer settlement had any chance of surviving in a duel against the experienced Pathfinder.

Others wanted to see Andel punished for his crimes. But even these people seemed to believe that Neph was doomed to die. They just hoped that she would manage to make the bastard bleed a little before she did.

Perhaps only Sunny, Cassie, and Caster knew that the result of this fight was not as predictable as everyone seemed to think.

Not wasting any time, Andel summoned his weapon and walked toward Changing Star. In his hand, a vicious, crudely forged falchion suddenly gleamed with polished luster, its edge turning sharper than that of a razor.

With a shudder, Sunny realized that not even the Starlight Legion Armor would stop such a blade.

The Pathfinder's movements were soft and deceptive, betraying years of experience in bloody battles against both Nightmare Creatures and humans. The dark smile had never left his lips, and there was bloodlust burning in his eyes. After years spent hunting monsters, he looked like a monster himself.

However, Nephis just stood there calmly and watched him approach, not even trying to summon her sword.

'What is she doing? Trying to mimic Harus?'

When the distance between them shortened to that of only several steps, everyone held their breaths. Suddenly, Andel flourished his cleaver and lunged forward with astonishing, almost inhuman speed. His push was so powerful that dust flew into the air from under the soles of his boots.

Sunny clenched his fists.

'...What is she!'

Just a fraction of a second before the magically enhanced blade cleaved her apart, Nephis suddenly sidestepped the strike and threw her arms into the air, simultaneously summoning her longsword. The ethereal sparks of light passed through the blade of Andel's falchion, forming into silvery steel only on the other side of it.

The Pathfinder's eyes widened.

...Forever.

Without anything separating it from the enemy's flesh, the longsword that had just formed from the thin air behind the falchion bit into his neck, cleanly severing Andel's head from his shoulders.

As blood shot into the air from the Pathfinder's neck, his head rolled on the floor like a macabre ball and stopped near the steps that led to Gunlaug's white throne.

It seemed as though all oxygen was suddenly sucked out of the great hall.

In the deathly silence, Andel's body heavily fell on the white marble.

Everyone was staring at Nephis in utter disbelief — the Sleepers, the Guards, even Gemma.

Honestly, Sunny himself was a bit stunned. Of course, he had suspected that Changing Star might win the duel. But even he did not expect that she would kill an actual Pathfinder, one of the most fearsome warriors in the Bright Castle, with just one strike.

Dismissing her sword with a cold expression on her face, Nephis walked over to the marble steps, picked up the severed head by the hair, and looked up at the leader of the Hunters.

Then, with a well-practiced polite smile, she said:

"...Oh. It was nice to meet you too."

Chapter 155: First Recruits | Shadow Slave

The blood was still dripping from Andel's severed head when they left the castle. Nephis was holding it by the hair, her face as indifferent as always. It seemed as though carrying human heads was not even something worthy of changing facial expressions.

Suddenly, Sunny saw Changing Star in a new light. It was a long time since he had last been wary of her, but now, he was starting to wonder.

Just how many people had she killed in the past?

The facial expressions of everyone else, though, ranged from astonishment to horror. People who had witnessed the duel stared at Nephis as though she was some sort of an avenging angel. The others treated her like a terrifying demon.

'I wonder... how much souls essence had she absorbed with this one kill? Has to be a lot, right?'

...But those were just the inhabitants of the castle. The reactions of the people of the outer settlement were strangely reserved, but even more intense. They had never seen one of them stroll into the ancient fortress and walk away freely with a severed head of a Pathfinder in their hands. Now, all of them were watching silently, an inexorable, dark, sweltering emotion burning in their eyes.

All of it made Sunny very uncomfortable.

He wasn't sure if Nephis knew what kind of a storm her stunt had evoked in the hearts of these people. That sort of emotion was dangerous and almost impossible to control. If she didn't know, things could turn really bad really quickly.

...But it was even worse if she did, and had done it on purpose. Was Nephis really capable of such ingenious and effective manipulation? Was this her plan all along?

Sunny wasn't sure that he knew this side of Changing Star.

Come to think of it, he didn't really know that much about her at all.

Consumed by these doubts, Sunny didn't even notice that they were already in front of Effie's cabin. He glanced at the sky, only to see the sun hiding behind the ominous silhouette of the Crimson Spire.

It was evening, just like Nephis had promised.

'...Scary.'

The unruly huntress opened the door before they even knocked, a hint of irritation in her eyes.

"What's with all the commotion?! Can't a girl spend a day in..."

Noticing the three of them, she froze.

Without so much as batting an eye, Nephis simply threw Andel's head to Effie's feet and asked:

"Can we talk now?"

Looking down at the macabre present, the huntress narrowed her eyes. Her face darkened.

A few moments later, she glanced up and said in a grim voice:

"Come inside."

As soon as the door closed behind them, Effie asked in a furious whisper:

"What the hell have you done, princess?!"

Nephis tilted her head and slightly frowned. Then, she said with a hint of sincere confusion in her voice:

"You wanted me to prove my strength. Did you not?"

The huntress stared at her in disbelief. Misunderstanding her silence, Neph blinked, then added:

"Oh. That head belonged to..."

"I know whose head it is! Where did you get it?!"

Sunny sighed and slumped heavily on one of the sturdy chests. Then he forced out a dark smile and said:

"Oh, by the way... you might be the last human in the Dark City to learn this, but standing right in front of you is none other than Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan, the champion of justice. She just walked into the castle, challenged the bastard, and killed him with one strike of her sword, right under everyone's eyes. By now, this must be the only thing people are talking about."

His tone lacked any kind of amusement. If anything, it seemed as though Sunny was just barely stopping himself from cursing out loud.

Why... why did trouble have to follow him everywhere he went?

While Neph and Cassie were anxiously waiting for Effie's response, Sunny just stared at his shadow, hoping to find some sympathy. Sadly, there wasn't any to be found. The shadow was just staring back at him, full of jubilant gloating.

Effie, meanwhile, blinked a couple of times and looked at them with a strange expression.

'That's right. Run while you can...'

Then, she threw her head back and laughed out loud.

"Oh! Oh, gods! Did you really?! This is priceless! I wish I'd seen their faces!"

Sunny watched her with his mouth wide open. That was not the reaction he had been expecting.

'Crazy, they're all crazy! I'm surrounded by crazy people!'

When Effie finished laughing, she glanced at Changing Star with a dark, but gleeful expression.

"Alright, you have proven your point. But there's something you should know. Back when I refused to join the Host, Gunlaug made it clear that if he can't have me, no one else will. Ever since, any group that dared to invite me to join them ended up regretting their decision. By hiring me as a guide, you will be putting yourself in his crosshairs. Are you sure you want to do this?"

So there was more to her story... no wonder she was so solitary.

In the ensuing silence, Sunny was the first one to speak. His voice sounded bitter and dejected:

"I mean... it's a bit late to worry about that. Don't you think?"

The next morning, they were preparing to go on a hunt. A small crowd of slum dwellers gathered around to see them off, their dark eyes burning with a strange mix of hope and anguish.

By now, the story of Changing Star's clever ruse and heroic battle against villainous Pathfinder Andel had already flown all over the place, growing more and more unbelievable with each retelling. Now, these people came to witness her with their own eyes.

They were especially interested in the Starlight Legion Armor and the symbol engraved on its breastplate. Who knew that the Memory of a simple carapace centurion would have such an effect on the inhabitants of the Dark City?

Sunny was not happy about it at all.

The previous evening, he had a chance to ask Nephis a few questions after they had returned to their lodge. However, he kept most of them to himself, not knowing how to properly express his feelings. In the end, he only asked about how she had managed to defeat her human opponent, who was much more powerful in terms of physical prowess, so easily.

Changing Star's answer was very simple. She just shrugged and said:

"An old Legacy trick."

Which pretty much explained everything and nothing at all.

And now, they were going into the Dark City to hunt monsters.

When the four of them were ready to set off, a sudden hum of voices made them turn around. The slum dwellers stepped aside, letting a tall young man walk through.

Sunny frowned.

'Great. What is he doing here?'

Walking closer, Caster stopped a few meters away from them and gave a polite bow.

"Lady Nephis, Huntress Athena, Cassia, Sunny. Good morning to all of you. I, Caster of the Han Li clan, would like to join your hunting party. Will you have me?"

Everyone grew quiet for a few moments. Despite Sunny's dislike of the handsome Legacy, having him on their side would be an incredible boon. Genius fighters like Caster were hard to come by anywhere, let alone on the Forgotten Shore. He felt torn.

A buzz of whispers rose from the crowd. People were shocked to see a warrior from the castle volunteering to join an outer settlement cohort. And one of such fearsome reputation, too!

After some time had passed, Changing Star simply shrugged.

"If you want."

Just like that, the proud scion of the Han Li clan had become the fifth member of their hunting party. It was strange to see their numbers grow after months spent alone in the Labyrinth, but that was probably inevitable.

What else did Sunny expect? That it would be just the three of them forever?

'Stupid...'

Together, the five Sleepers left the slum of the outer settlement behind and stepped on the road of white stone that lead into the cursed ruins.

...And just like that, the fates of every human in the Dark City were sealed.

The end had begun.

Chapter 156: Free Lunch | Shadow Slave

Their first hunt was surprisingly uneventful.

Guided by an experienced pathfinder and augmented by Sunny's stealthy shadow, they managed to avoid any Fallen creatures and arrive at the destination in one piece. There, the group hid in the ruins and waited for their prey to show up.

The plan of battle was discussed beforehand. After Effie had described the type of monster they were here to kill, complete with a detailed list of its strengths and weaknesses, Nephis quickly assigned different roles to different people.

Sunny had expected that things would work just like back in the Labyrinth, but to his surprise, they did not. Just like before, Neph was going to take most of the risk and lure the enemy into revealing its vulnerability. However, Caster was going to be the one to make use of it and deal the fatal blow, not Sunny.

Which made sense, really. After all, his Ability was not a combat one, at least not officially. It was rational to entrust the role to someone with an incredibly powerful combat Ability, as the one Caster possessed.

Still, for some reason, Sunny felt angry about it. It felt as though he was being replaced.

Not wishing to appear childish, he swallowed his bitterness and remained silent.

When the monster did show up, everything went perfectly. Nephis and Caster were able to finish the creature off without sustaining any injuries. Their teamwork, while not effortless, was strangely harmonious, probably because both were Legacies and had received similar kind of training. Sunny, whose task was to join the fray if things went wrong, ended up not having to lift a finger.

Neither did Effie, who simply stayed with Cassie in case the blind girl needed protection. After everything was over, she laughed:

"Ha, this is the easiest meal I've ever earned!"

Effie's status in the party was a bit strange. Unlike the rest of them, she had not shown any desire to join the cohort officially. Instead, she was somewhat of a hired worker — her responsibilities included guiding the party through the ruins and providing them with information, and nothing else. She wasn't even required to fight side by side with them.

After the Nightmare Creature was dead, they quickly butchered it and left the scene of the battle loaded with a heavy weight of meat. Before the shadow of the Crimson Spire fell on the Dark City, the cohort was already approaching the marble arch at the base of the hill.

This was when something unexpected finally happened. And it happened because of Nephis.

After giving a fair share of the spoils to the vigorous huntress, she glanced at Sunny, Cassie, and Caster. Then, Changing Star said:

"I would like for you three to entrust me with your part of the meat."

'What? What is that about?'

Before Sunny had an opportunity to ask a question, Cassie already smiled and said:

"Of course, Neph!"

Caster did not linger, either. With a small bow, he nodded.

"As you wish, lady Nephis."

Sunny gritted his teeth. After that, he would have looked like a complete jerk if he were to start interrogating her. Especially because, technically, he had not done anything except for lending his shadow to Effie. Nephis and Caster were the ones who had actually risked their lives.

"...Fine."

Nephis gave them a nod and continued walking up the white road.

When they returned to the outer settlement, she separated the remaining share of monster meat into two parts. One, much smaller part, she handed to Cassie. The other, incomparably larger part, she simply placed on the white stones in front of their lodge.

Effie looked at the whole process with curiosity. So did the slum dwellers who had gathered to welcome them back.

Sunny frowned:

"What are you doing?"

Changing Star glanced at him and then gestured to the small bundle of meat in Cassie's hands.

"This is for us to sustain ourselves. We will eat that meat until our next hunt."

Somebody from the crowd shouted:

"What about the rest? Are you selling it? What is your price?"

It was customary for the outer settlement hunters to sell some of their spoils. That was how people here fed themselves. The meat could be exchanged for items, services, or, in very rare cases, actual shards.

Neph turned to the people who had gathered around and looked at them with a frown. When everyone grew quiet, she said in a cold tone:

"My hunting party will not be selling any meat. Ever."

Before anyone had time to react, dismayed by that answer, she took a step to the side, gestured to the large pile of meat, and said:

"...Instead, we will be giving it away for free."

A dead silence hung above the edge of the outer settlement. The slum dwellers who had come to catch a glimpse of Changing Star or in hope of procuring some food were all looking at Nephis with a dark mix of mistrust, disbelief, and suspicion.

After a while, someone shouted:

"What trick are you trying to play? People here are hungry, Changing Star! Shame on you!"

Nephis crossed her arm, furrowed her brow, and answered:

"There is no trick. Everyone is free to take a small share of the meat to fill their stomach."

The young man who had accused her before laughed.

"Why would you just hand it out for free? Do you think that we're fools?"

Sunny was being tormented by the same question. He often joked about Neph's foolish nobility, but he also knew that she wasn't really stupid. She always had a reason for everything she did, even if those reasons sometimes seemed insane to him.

Lately, he even started to suspect that Neph was much more cynical and pragmatic than he had ever given her credit for. It's just that her version of cynicism was very different from his own.

What was she doing?

Meanwhile, Nephis pierced the shouter with a cold look, scowled, and said, a hint of anger in her voice:

"...Why? Am I not a human? Are you not humans? Does a human need a reason to help others of her kind in this cursed place?!"

She took a step forward and looked at the gathered people, making them shiver under her heavy gaze.

"Shame on me? No. Shame on you all for forgetting who you are. We are people, not beasts. In the real world or in the Dream Realm, this is who we are."

Her words echoed above the white stones, mixing with the howling wind.

"Now come forward and take some food if you're hungry!"

The slum dwellers were still not convinced. However, their hunger was stronger than their wariness. Soon, the first of them stepped forward, tentatively took a small strip of meat, threw a furtive glance at Nephis, and then hurriedly walked away.

When the others saw that nothing happened to him, they became braver. Young men and women dressed in rags formed a messy line. One by one, they came forward, received their tiny piece of meat, and then disappeared with haste, afraid that it will be taken back.

Slowly, a new kind of light appeared on their faces. It was the same timid, weak emotion that Sunny had noticed in the eyes of the castle inhabitants after Neph had announced her name.

It was something that precipitated hope, or maybe faith.

With a dark expression on his face, Sunny looked up, at the tiny silhouettes of Guards observing them from the walls of the magnificent fortress.

Nephis was right when she said that they were all still people. However, she was wrong about everything else.

Because people were much worse than beasts.

...He did not like what was happening at all.

Chapter 157: Wind Of Change

After that day, things moved with a speed that left Sunny disoriented. It was as though he was being pulled forward by an overpowering current, helpless to slow down or change direction. Before he could react to one change, another would happen, making him feel like he was losing control. Everything was happening so fast that he found it difficult to adjust.

It was hard not to fear that, eventually, he would simply be left behind.

After that first hunt where Nephis had chosen to give most of the spoils away, she led them on several more. Not all of those hunts went as smoothly, but they did manage to return victorious, if a little battered. Every time, she paid Effie her share of the meat, took a small amount for them to consume, and gave the rest to the people of the outer settlement free of charge.

Because of how little their own share was, the group was forced to hunt every other day instead of once or twice a month. Sunny did not understand at all why they were taking on all that unnecessary risk.

Provided, he wasn't exposed to many risks himself. Apart from a couple of short battles where Neph and Caster ended up requiring some backup, he spent most of his time with Effie, serving as her scout and slowly learning the ins and outs of the Dark City from her.

With the well of knowledge that the unruly huntress possessed and his nimble shadow, the party rarely met anything they weren't ready to face. This gave them an incredible advantage over all other hunting parties of the outer settlement, and even some of Gunlaug's own.

Soon, their flawless and intense track record earned the cohort reputation and renown. They weren't seen as newcomers anymore. Instead, people considered them to be nothing short of the strongest hunters in the slum. Many even believed that Changing Star and her people were in no way inferior to the Hunters of the Bright Castle.

Nephis herself was known to be a fearsome fighter ever since her dramatic duel with Andel. Effie had the reputation as one of the outer settlement's best from a long time ago. Handsome and capable Caster quickly won respect and adoration thanks to his amiable personality, noble bearing, and skill.

The three of them were considered to be the core of the party, with Cassie and Sunny existing somewhere on the periphery. People loved Cassie because Neph had entrusted her with the responsibility of handing out the free meat... and also because it was nearly impossible not to love this sweet, exquisitely beautiful, and tragic girl. For most of the slum dwellers, she was the welcoming face of the cohort.

Sunny, on the other hand... no one really paid him any attention. With no valiant feats of vanquishing monsters of the Dark City under his belt, most considered him to be a mere support member of the party. Inconsequential at best... a charity case at worst.

If they even remembered his existence.

Sunny was simultaneously happy to live in obscurity and secretly infuriated by this lack of recognition. It was good that no one suspected how powerful he really was. And yet... watching everyone fall over themselves in Caster's presence while completely ignoring his own made Sunny want to kill something. Or someone.

Especially because, due to the tactical composition of the cohort, Nephis spend most of her time with the handsome Legacy. They seemed to work especially well together.

When this frustration threatened to overwhelm Sunny, he would go away, find a quiet corner, and train his katas until every muscle in his body hurt. Usually, the whistle of the Midnight Shard's blade cutting air was enough to calm him. He trained his swordsmanship day after day, finding strange comfort in it. At least this was something he could control.

...Of course, Sunny was never entirely relaxed. In fact, with each day, he grew more and more anxious.

Because other things were changing as well.

After each hunt, Changing Star would provide the dwellers of the slum with free food. At first, they treated her with distrust, then with gratitude, and finally with something akin to reverence. The strange light that Sunny had noticed in their eyes after that first time was slowly growing brighter and brighter.

Some people even started jokingly calling her "Saint Nephis", as though she was some sort of an angel. However, he felt that these words strangely contained less and less humor with each day.

It was really very creepy, not to mention dangerous. The more people looked at Nephe like she was their personal savior, the more he feared how drastic Gunlaug's reaction would be. If history had shown anything, it was that kings never went easy on meddling messiahs.

And throughout all of that, the same question continued to torment Sunny.

Was all of this an accident, or had Nephis done it on purpose?

As time went by, more and more random people joined their group. They weren't hunters, just forlorn young men and women from the outer settlement who wanted to help. They tended to monster hides that the cohort brought back from the hunts, maintained various tools and gear that needed to be used, assisted Cassie with handing out food, and did other kinds of small but useful things.

Soon, the ramshackle lodge was full of them. Sunny didn't even know all of their names. It seemed as though every day, someone new would appear, acting as if they had always been a part of the group. What's worse, not all of them seemed to know who he was, either. No once and not twice, someone would smile at him and ask in a friendly tone:

"Are you new?"

...Of course, bastards never said the same thing to Caster.

Sunny felt like he was slowly becoming a stranger in his own home. The feeling was rather unpleasant, not to mention how perfectly it fit all his insecurities.

What's worse, these new people really made him uncomfortable. He wasn't really sure of whether they were Changing Star's helpers, or if they were her followers.

Were they loyal, or... devout?

...One night after a couple of weeks of this, he was suddenly woken by Cassie tugging on his sleeve. The blind girl was whispering:

"Sunny! Wake up!"

A moment later, he was already on his feet, ready to summon the Midnight Shard. A light coming from the other room told him that Neph was awake, too.

'Gunlaug? Did someone betray us?'

"What's wrong?"

Cassie covered the candle she was holding in her hand and answered in a worried voice:

"Something... something is coming from the road. I've dreamt of it."

'A Nightmare Creature...'

Knowing what had to be done, Sunny simply nodded, gripped her shoulder for reassurance, and walked over to meet Nephis.

Since their lodge was on the edge of the slum, right in front of the entrance of the ancient road, they had no choice but to fight.

That night, the three of them — Changing Star, Sunny, and Caster — battled a devil that had wandered up the hill and fought it off before it could reach the outer settlement.

When dawn came, terrified people walked out of their hovels on shaking legs and saw the horrible marks left on the white stones by the beast's claws, as well as puddles of blood, both human and that of a monster, steaming in the morning cold.

They also saw Changing Star leaning tiredly on her silver sword.

Sunny, who was sitting with his back against the wall of the lodge and breathing heavily, was looking at her, too.

...Back when he was describing to Nephis why Gunlaug could never be defeated, he had told her that every facet of life here was under his control: food, safety, hope, fear, even power itself.

Now, Changing Star had given these people food. By protecting the outer settlement, she had given them safety. She had even given them hope.

There was also the fear that the inhabitants of the castle felt after Neph had easily beheaded one of their Pathfinders.

All that remained was power.

Finally, the question that pressed heavily on his mind had an answer.

No, none of this was a coincidence. Everything that had happened, from choosing the outermost building in the slum as their base to insisting on giving away the food for free, was part of Changing Star's strange but methodical plan. She knew what she was doing all along.

But why was she doing all this? What was her ultimate goal?

Uneasy, Sunny stared at Nephis and wondered about the future.

Chapter 158: Invisible | Shadow Slave

After about a month of living in the outer settlement, Sunny woke up one morning with the feeling of not belonging anywhere in this world. This familiar feeling had pursued him for most of his life, and had returned recently after being gone for some time.

With a sigh, he rose from his narrow cot and summoned the Puppeteer's Shroud. The stone lodge was already full of sounds and voices. The tempting smell of breakfast filled the air.

Coming out of his small room, Sunny saw a bunch of Neph's helpers rushing here and there, busy with various tasks. Some of them stopped to greet him, others did not. He paid no attention to them and went outside to wash his face and take a look at the sky.

The grey sky of the Forgotten Shore looked as it always did. Nothing ever really changed in this loathsome hell.

On his way back, Sunny noticed a gaunt figure standing hesitantly near the doors of the lodge. The ragged young man looked very familiar.

Reaching into his memory, Sunny identified him as the friendly, but nervous receptions from the castle. His clothes were much less clean and tidy than they had been before, and his face had become even thinner.

The young man had clearly seen better days.

'What is he doing there?'

Coming closer, Sunny called out to the young man:

"Uh... Harper, right? How come you're here?"

Harper flinched, then looked at him with anxious eyes:

"Oh... Sunless! It's, uh... it's so nice to see you."

Sunny stared at him for a while, then asked bluntly:

"Did they kick you out of the castle?"

Harper's face instantly fell. Lowering his gaze, he stayed silent for a few moments, and then said quietly:

"I haven't been able to pay the tribute anymore. So... yes. I guess they did."

Then he glanced up, hesitated, and asked in a weak voice:

"I... I heard that I can get some food here?"

Sunny tried to give him a reassuring smile.

"Sure. Usually, we give out meat after the hunts. But if you're hungry right now, I'm certain there's something we can do. Just talk to... uh... a girl with red hair. She's in charge of breakfast, I think."

Harper smiled, too, the weak light of hope igniting in his eyes.

"Really? They will just give me a meal for free?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Why not? We have enough food right now. Most of those guys and girls are always here, anyway. They're like guests that won't le... uh, doesn't matter. They help around, doing this and that, to express their gratitude, I guess. If you feel guilty just eating for free, ask them for some chore. This might not be the Bright Castle, but you'll see that life here can be not bad as well."

Guiding the gaunt young man inside, Sunny directed him toward the kitchen and sighed.

Even castle dwellers were now coming to their lodge. If this went on, he would have to share his room with some random stranger. What a joke.

Entering the main hall, he noticed Nephis and Caster standing near the window, discussing the approaching hunt. This morning, there were several hunters from other parties surrounding them. The cohort had been planning a big joint hunt for a while now, and today was the day.

'Did they just... start without me?'

Hiding his discontent, Sunny walked over to the group of hunters and greeted them. Caster smiled at him, while Nephis simply nodded. The other hunters glanced at the new arrival and didn't pay him much attention.

'Fools. If you knew who stands before you...'

Consoling himself with these childish thoughts, Sunny listened to the discussion. One of the hunters was speaking:

"...South of the collapsed lighthouse is a good choice, but the Awakened creatures living there have an incredibly sharp hearing. Attacking them in large numbers won't be easy."

In the past month, their lodge had gone through a transformation. The remnants of broken furniture were long gone and replaced. Some of the new pieces of furniture came from the ruins, some were made right here by the craftsmen of the outer settlement. There were monster hides and decorations hung on the walls, making the space look neat and presentable.

These days, the lodge appeared as the headquarters of a small, but prosperous Awakened cohort. There was even a large map of the Dark City on one of the walls, with various symbols marking all kinds of useful information.

Currently, the hunter was pointing at a particular spot on the map:

"This spot right here is much more promising. Blood Fiends are known to dwell in these parts. They hibernate during the day, so if we manage to find a lair or two..."

Caster shook his head.

"The area you're suggesting is too close to the territory of those strange living statues. We all know how formidable those bizarre creatures are. I still think that south of the lighthouse is better. We just need to think of a way to deceive the hearing of the monsters..."

Suddenly finding something that he could be helpful with, Sunny said:

"Uh, I have a bell that can..."

However, his voice drowned in the buzz of the conversation. No one paid attention to his words.

Embarrassed, Sunny inhaled deeply, waited for a few seconds, and spoke again:

"Actually, we can use one of my two sound-producing Memories to..."

But right at that moment, Caster seemed to come up with a brilliant idea. Everyone listened to him, turning their backs to Sunny. It was as though he was completely invisible.

'What... what's even the damn point?'

Sunny stood there for a minute or two, feeling awkward, angry, and utterly stupid. Then he simply turned around and walked away.

Finding his way to the roof of the lodge, he climbed on top of the second-storey addition and sat there, solemnly watching as the sun slowly climbed up. After a while, Sunny sighed and closed his eyes, letting the shadow slip back into the building.

Just as he had expected, no one even noticed his absence. Not surprised, he sent the shadow around the lodge, watching all the people who were busy making Neph's mysterious plans happen.

Everyone seemed full of energy, enthusiasm, and a sense of belonging.

Why was he the only one who couldn't fit in?

Even that guy from the castle, Harper, had already found some friends. He was currently helping the red-haired girl who was in charge of breakfast wash the dishes.

Sunny frowned.

Something... something wasn't quite right with Harper. He couldn't put his finger on it, but the gaunt young man seemed a little off, somehow.

Forgetting all about his bad mood, Sunny concentrated on watching the timid Sleeper. Harper seemed to do just what any newcomer would do: helping people, learning their names, and asking questions about how things worked in the Changing Star's party. It seemed as though he wanted very badly to stay in the lodge and become useful. Which was understandable.

But something was wrong.

Sunny's suspicions were confirmed when, about an hour later, Harper left the lodge and went back into the slum. With the shadow stealthily following him from behind, the gaunt young man made sure that no one saw him and hurriedly dove into a secluded alley. Deep in the darkness of that alley, a man was waiting for him.

Sunny frowned, recognizing one of the high-ranking Guards from the castle.

'So that's what all this is about.'

The Guard, meanwhile, glared at Harper and asked in a rough, unfriendly tone:

"Well?"

Harper looked down, his fear and anxiousness apparent.

"Yes! Yes, uh, sir. I've done what you told me. It wasn't very hard."

The Guard smiled.

"Good. It seems that you really do want to return to the castle."

Harper glanced up, a desperate light igniting in his eyes.

"Really? So... I can return? Even though I don't have any shards to pay the tribute?"

The smile disappeared from the Guard's face.

"You will be able to return after you gather all the information that I told you to learn. If you do, I'll invite you inside myself. No need to even worry about the tribute. But! Remember: I need to know everything about the core members of the cohort, including Saint Nephis herself. Their Aspects, their Abilities, their Flaws. I even want to know what hand they use to wipe. Understand?"

Harper paled.

"But, sir... things like that... it won't be easy to learn them! Especially for, for a simple servant like me."

The Guard frowned.

"Didn't you say that you knew two of the cohort members already? This is why I gave you this chance to begin with. Did you lie to me, boy?"

The gaunt young man flinched.

"No! No, I do know them. I actually spoke with Lady Changing Star's scout already. He... he is a friend of mine."

A wide, menacing smile appeared on the Guard's face.

"When what's the problem? Just get that fool talking. Rats like him will tell you everything as long as you pay them a little attention, believe me. I'm willing to bet that this useless freeloader is walking around full of jealousy and delusions of grandeur. Pretend to respect him even a little, and he won't be able to shut up."

'Ouch.'

Harper nodded, then suddenly hesitated. After a few moments of silence, he asked in a timid voice:

"Sir... you won't hurt them, will you? They are... they are good people."

The Guard stared at him for a second or two, then said in a dark, mocking tone:

"Why do you ask if you already know the answer?"

Hearing those words, Harper deflated. His face darkened, and he lowered his head, as though ashamed to look straight.

...However, he didn't object.

'That bastard! Just wait and see...'

Sunny was already planning the beating he was going to give the cowardly young man before throwing him out of the lodge, but at that moment, a voice called out for him.

It was Effie.

"Hey, doofus! Are you asleep? Come down, the hunt is starting!"

Torn away from the shadow's perspective, Sunny threw a dark glance at the tall huntress, called his shadow back, and sighed.

'I'll deal with him after we return.'

...But by the time he returned, Sunny was in no state to deal with anything.

Chapter 159: Revelation | Shadow Slave

Despite all his misgivings and unease, Sunny had never expected that this hunt was going to change everything. He was just going through the motions, somewhat on edge because of the scale of this joint operation, but also strangely reassured by the large number of hunters surrounding him.

The unusual hunting party left the outer settlement at noon, heading east, to the massive ruin of a collapsed lighthouse that was situated at the edge of the city. There were almost twenty of them gathered together, all carefully making their way through the deadly maze of narrow streets, with Effie serving as the chief pathfinder and Sunny helping her by scouting ahead.

The plan was as straightforward and simple as possible. However, nothing was really ever safe in the Dark City. Everyone was prepared for the worst.

And pretty soon, their fears came true.

Halfway to their destination, a sudden sound made Effie freeze in place. Raising a fist to signal everyone to stop, she peered into the fog, a dark and foreboding expression on her face. Feeling that something bad was about to happen, Sunny commanded his shadow to return and moved closer to Cassie. His hand was ready to grasp the hilt of the Midnight Shard out of the air.

For a few moments, everything was quiet. Then, Effie's pupils suddenly widened.

"Scatter!"

As soon as the word left her mouth, the experienced hunters dashed in different directions. Sunny himself grabbed Cassie and lunged to the side, dragging her along with him.

Then, something large and heavy crashed from above into the cobblestones where the Sleepers had been standing just a second ago. Luckily, most of them were already somewhere else due to Effie's timely warning.

However, a couple of people were a little late to react. Their screams drowned in the sickening sound of tearing flesh.

Sunny cursed.

His shadow was nowhere near yet, leaving him with no choice but to fight without its aid. He spun around, summoning the Midnight Shard... and froze for a fraction of a second, all blood draining from his face.

Out there in the middle of the street, a massive, winged creature was standing on the cracked cobblestones, its pale body and black feather stained by the blood of the unfortunate hunters. Its terrifying beak was open, revealing rows of sharp, needle-like fangs.

A Spire Messenger!

As Sunny watched, momentarily paralyzed by fear, a long red tongue snaked out of the creature's maw to lick the blood off its face.

'Move!'

Shaking off the paralysis, Sunny gripped his sword and prepared to fight for his life.

...His and Cassie's.

After that, everything happened incredibly fast, but also felt like an eternity. The hunters had a simple choice to make: either separate into smaller groups and retreat into the ruins, risking encountering something equally as or even more terrifying, or stand their ground and try to drive the Fallen Beast away. Without having to discuss it, everyone chose the second option.

No matter how dangerous, a familiar enemy was always better than the unknown.

'Unknown...'

The surviving hunters attacked the abomination with all they had. Even though their Memories had no chance of breaking through the skin of the

terrible creature, each strike still hurt it. Those who had Aspect Abilities capable of dealing direct damage immediately used them, hoping to at least disorient the beast.

Of course, no Ability of a Sleeper could ever hope to wound a Fallen Beast. However, if their assault was ferocious enough, the Messenger could retreat to search for easier prey.

If it only made the abomination angrier, however, most of them were going to die. More than anything, trying to resist creatures of this rank was nothing but a gamble.

For several seconds, it wasn't clear which way the situation would turn. The Messenger easily shrugged off the rain of attacks and lashed out with its beak, piercing one of the hunters clean through despite the man's mighty build and heavy armor. Another was almost torn apart by terrifying talons, but at the last second, Caster managed to pull the young man away thanks to his incredible speed.

Sunny waited at the back, covering Cassie and praying that his shadow would come back in time to give him a chance of dealing damage to the damned creature.

...But in the end, it was Effie who dealt the decisive blow.

Summoning her weapon, she leaped forward. Sunny could see her lean, powerful muscles moving like wire ropes under the olive skin. As though turning into a spring, her whole body tensed, and then exploded with momentum. There was enough force behind her attack to split a mountain apart.

Miraculously, the tip of her weapon managed to break the pale hide on the Messenger's chest and stab deep, causing a stream of blood to shoot out. The creature screamed, and then lashed out with its powerful paws at the huntress.

A large round shield appeared on Effie's left hand. Digging the soles of her sandals into the ground, she leaned forward and received the terrifying

blow. The cobblestones under her feet cracked, but the huntress remained standing.

Spitting a mouthful of blood, she grinned crazily and twisted her weapon, causing more damage and pain to the Messenger.

It seemed as if the Fallen Beast did not expect to meet such fierce resistance from a bunch of ants, not to mention actually being hurt by them. Letting out another scream, it waved its wings to send the Sleepers flying back, picked up the dead hunters, and jumped into the air.

Soon, the abomination turned into a dark spot in the skies. All that remained behind were puddles of blood, broken stones, and the moans of battered humans.

Somehow, they had survived... well, most of them.

Effie straightened, dismissed her shield, and glanced down.

"Damn. I think my arm is broken!"

With blood running down her chin, the huntress laughed and leaned on her weapon, visibly exhausted.

Sunny wanted to congratulate her on that awesome strike, but then, something registered in his mind.

Suddenly cold, he stared at Effie's weapon. He had never seen her fight before, so this was the first time Sunny saw what Memory the huntress used in battle.

It was a spear. An ancient, beautiful spear forged from bronze.

Something clicked in his mind, disparate pieces of information connecting together.

And then, everything exploded.

... Or at least it felt that way.

Because Sunny finally understood the future.

Chapter 160: The Future | Shadow Slave

"Hey, doofus. You're okay?"

Sunny reacted after a second or two, raising his head and staring at Effie with empty eyes.

"...Y—yeah. I'm fine. Just... thinking about stuff."

Effie gave him a strange look, then shrugged and turned away. Everyone was too busy to pay him any attention. Not that anyone ever did.

Left alone, Sunny staggered and slowly lowered himself to the ground. In his mind, one phrase was repeating itself, over and over, growing louder and louder with each second.

"A woman with a bronze spear drowning in a tide of monster... a woman with a bronze spear..."

This was a part of the vision that Cassie had seen back at the beginning of their journey, on the night they had spent atop the giant statue of a headless knight.

The one that was so harrowing that she had almost jumped into the dark waters of the cursed sea just to run away from her terror.

It was also the key that connected every little piece of information that Sunny knew into one cohesive picture and let him understand the true meaning of that terrifying vision.

He shuddered, remembering what Cassie had told them on that dark night in stark detail:

'I saw the human castle again. Only this time, it was at night. There was a lonely star burning in the black skies, and under its light, the castle was suddenly consumed by fire, with rivers of blood flowing down its halls. I saw a corpse in a golden armor sitting on a throne; a woman with a bronze

spear drowning in a tide of monsters; an archer trying to pierce the falling sky with his arrows...'

All that time, Sunny was sure, for some reason, that Cassie saw the cataclysm that had devoured this land and turned it into a desolate hell, creating the Forgotten Shore. The first part of the vision was certainly referring to how the curse of the all-consuming darkness had broken free from its seven seals. So he had just assumed that the other parts of the vision spoke about the past, too.

But Effie's spear gave him an epiphany, a terrible revelation that he had been wrong all this time. That the apocalyptic images Cassie had described were not of the past, but of the future.

Their future.

Trembling, Sunny raised his head and glanced at Nephis, who was using her powers to heal the wounded hunters, her ivory face contorted in a painful grimace. His eyes were wide and full of disbelief.

It was all so clear!

She... she was the lonely star that burned in the dark skies above the Bright Castle, bringing with it fire and rivers of blood. After all, her name was Changing Star.

Or, depending on the runes used to write it, Star of Misfortune.

The Star of Ruin.

Sunny spent so much time fearing what Gunlaug was going to do with Nephis, but he should have been scared of what she was going to do to him, instead. A corpse in a golden armor sitting on a throne... why hadn't he realized the truth after seeing the Bright Lord for the first time? It was him. Gunlaug was the corpse in Cassie's vision.

Effie was the woman drowning in the sea of monsters. The archer...Sunny didn't know yet, but he was sure that they would meet soon.

Maybe only to die together.

He had always known that Nephis was guided by some mysterious, overwhelming goal. He didn't know what that goal was, but it was certainly not here, on the Forgotten Shore. To achieve it, Changing Star had to find a way to return to the real world.

That's why she had always been so unwavering and relentless in her ambition to move forward, overcome any obstacle, endure any pain. At times, it even seemed as though her conviction was more akin to an obsession. Nephis was willing to do anything to fulfill her dream.

The comforting words she had told him on their first day in the Dark City suddenly resounded in his mind. Only now, there was another, colder, and much darker meaning hiding beneath their surface:

"We will find a way to return. No matter what has to be done, we will."

No matter what has to be done...

There was only one way to leave the Forgotten Shore, and it lay in the Crimson Spire. No Sleeper could ever hope to reach that Gateway in one piece. They would need an army to even try. Maybe then, walking on corpses, one or two survivors would be able to escape from this cursed place.

But Nephis didn't have an army.

...Yet.

To gather one, she would need to kill Gunlaug, usurp his power and eliminate all opposition, drowning the Bright Castle in blood. Only then would she be able to rally every single Sleeper left in the Dark City and lure them into following her on a suicidal crusade. Knowing all too well that most of them would die because of it.

No sane person would follow her.

'They won't. Right?'

Sunny remembered the faces of the young men and women that had become part of their group in the last few weeks. The strange light of hope, or maybe faith, burning in their eyes. The almost religious reverence they felt toward Nephis... no, not Nephis. Toward Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan.

Their personal angel.

Were they sane, still?

Finally, he understood every part of Neph's plan.

Looking at the beautiful young woman with silver hair, Sunny shivered.

And then... there was the last part of the prophecy.

On their way back, Sunny felt as though he was in a feverish dream. The magnitude of the revelation was too... too much for him. His mind felt weak, unsteady, and on the verge of breaking apart.

He had never experienced such a deep feeling of shock. It was as though the very core of his being was violently shaken. He wasn't equipped with the right tools to cope with it.

It felt as if he was on the verge of losing it.

Sunny was truly horrified.

'Don't... don't waste time trying to deal with your emotions. This is not the right time for feelings. You need to... to figure out how all of this affects you personally, and what you need to do to turn things to your advantage.'

After all... what was there to be scared of? That many people would die? What did their lives and deaths have to do with him?

Yes... yes. As long as he was the one left standing in the end, this whole thing might actually turn out to be beneficial. Hadn't he spent the last weeks

being afraid of what Gunalug was going to do to them? Well, now he knew that Gunlaug was going to end up as a corpse. Problem solved.

Wasn't he crushed by the news that he would spend the rest of his life in this odious hell? Well, now that wasn't a certainty anymore. That last part of the prophecy...

Everything was well. Better than ever.

...And yet, no matter how much Sunny was trying to be rational, he just couldn't help but be filled with terror.

In the crimson light of sunset, he found a reason to leave the lodge and walked to the edge of the stone platform. No one really cared that much about his whereabouts, so it wasn't hard to disappear for a while.

No one noticed that something was bothering Sunny, either. They were all accustomed to his moody behavior, anyway. Only Cassie seemed to have picked up on something.

...And Caster, who pretended to be carefree, but actually had a habit of watching anyone close to Nephis like a hawk.

The bastard...

Reaching the very end of the stone platform, Sunny turned around and looked at the outer settlement and the magnificent castle towering above it, with hundreds of Sleepers rushing to find shelter before the coming of night. A cold and harrowing feeling gripped his heart.

'All these people... all these people are going to die.'

Neph was going to kill them.

...Was he willing to help her do it?

For some reason, Sunny wanted to laugh. This whole situation was so sick and appalling that it was almost ridiculous. He was never an altruistic type, really. More than that, he always prided himself on being a cynical, selfish, and vicious person. But this... this was too much even for him.

Grabbing his head, Sunny moaned.

'What am I going to do?!'

At that moment, the sound of steps suddenly attracted his attention. A gaunt figure appeared from the slum and walked toward him.

Sunny frowned.

'Oh, right. That guy...I have completely forgotten about him.'

Harper stopped a few paces away and smiled timidly.

"Sunless! Uh... can we talk?"

Chapter 161: Rubicon | Shadow Slave

Harper stared at him with that pathetic timid smile frozen on his lips. In his eyes, there was fake friendliness, worry, and desperation. For some reason, Sunny felt a violent urge to erase the smile of his face.

'You scum...'

In his rattled state, he was having trouble controlling his emotions. Something must have shown on his face, because Harper suddenly blinked and took a step back. But in the end, the desire to be allowed back into the Bright Castle won over his caution. He forced himself to stay still, hesitated for a few moments, and said:

"I... I wanted to thank you for inviting me into your home this morning."

Sunny looked at the gaunt young man. In the twilight of dusk, his pale face was hidden in deep shadows. Finally, he answered:

"Yeah. We can talk."

'Think, Sunny, think...'

But his mind was refusing to obey. Most of it was drowning in the sea of cold terror that had been summoned by the revelation of the future. What little remained was utterly disoriented.

Sunny raised one hand and rubbed his face.

'He's a spy. He's here to make it easier for Gunlaug to kill us. What should be done?'

In the morning... yes, back before everything changed, Sunny had seen Harper reporting to one of the Guards. He wanted to give the cowardly young man a beating and throw him out of the lodge... but that would be a wrong decision.

The best thing to do was not to expose the unfortunate spy, but to feign ignorance and feed him false information. Yeah... that was the optimal way to deal with moles. As an aspiring spy himself, Sunny knew these things well.

But would he even be able to deceive Harper? By accident, the failed informant had chosen a perfect person as his mark. Sunny knew a lot of secrets and was incapable of lying.

But he was also a master of deception. So...

"Sunless?"

Sunny flinched and glanced at the gaunt young man.

"Sorry. Uh... I'm a bit out of sorts after today's hunt. You wanted to talk?"

Reassured, Harper smiled again.

"You see, I wanted to thank you for everything that you had done for me, and for all the people here in the settlement. When I left the castle, I brought a very special item with me. I thought of sharing it with you!"

Sunny frowned.

"A special item?"

"I should see what his plan is exactly, feed him a couple of little truths along with the lies, and then report to Neph in the morning. R—right?"

Harper, meanwhile, was nodding energetically:

"It's a... a bottle of liquor. Every month, a few are sold by the Artisans working in the garden. Getting one is very hard, but I was lucky. Would you like to come and try? My hut is nearby."

Sunny got distracted for a few moments, but then forced himself to concentrate. What was Harper talking about? Artisans, liquor, luck...

'...Why not?'

Giving Harper a nod, he gestured for the young man to lead the way and followed.

As they passed other slum dwellers on their way to Harper's hovel, Sunny couldn't help but feel like they were surrounded by walking corpses.

Most of these people were already dead. They just didn't know it yet.

...But he did.

The weight of this knowledge was slowly crushing him.

Harper's small hut was even more pathetic than the other hovels in the slum. It was crudely constructed out of rotting pieces of wood, with plenty of cracks to let the cold wind in. Inside, there was nothing except for a pile of seaweed thatch that served as a flimsy mattress and a low wooden table. Sunny could understand why the gaunt Sleeper was so desperate to return to the castle.

At least there was a door.

Once inside, Harper looked around with embarrassment and invited Sunny to sit on the floor in front of the table. Then, he dug a glass jar from beneath the seaweed and placed it in front of him like a rare treasure. Producing a crude iron knife from somewhere, Harper then opened the wax seal of the jar, placed the knife on the table, and poured a milky white liquid into a chipped clay cup.

"Here!"

He handed the cup to Sunny and smiled.

Sunny received it and smelled the strange liquor. He remembered many people in the outskirts who had drowned themselves in the bottle or killed themselves with cheap stimulants and drugs. Luckily, he was always too paranoid to allow anything to alter his mental state. Plus, for a long time, he couldn't allow himself to die before accomplishing a certain thing.

That's why Sunny was not too familiar with alcohol.

Bringing the cup to his lips, he held his breath and downed it in one go. A pleasant warmth immediately spread through his body, bringing with it a bit of sweet solace.

'...I can see the appeal.'

It wasn't too bad, really.

Harper hurriedly refilled the cup and asked:

"I heard about the latest hunt. By gods, you have survived an encounter with a Spire Messenger! That must have been horrible..."

Sunny lingered for a bit, then shrugged.

"I just stood at the back."

The gaunt young man shook his head.

"Still. You are incredible! I hear that you have been with Lady Changing Star from the very beginning, surviving more than two months in the Labyrinth. Is this true?"

He was a really bad actor. Even if Sunny didn't know that Harper was a spy already, he would have sensed something strange at this point. But it was easy to pretend not to notice anything.

'Rats like me will tell you everything as long as you show them a tiny bit of respect, huh?'

Flushed because of the liquor, Sunny slowly smiled:

"Oh... yes! In fact, if it wasn't for me, she would have been long dead. Do you know how many times I saved her life?"

This part was entirely planned, aimed to create a false sense that Harper's plan to use pettiness and jealousy to loosen his tongue worked. However,

the next words came out of Sunny's mouth on their own.

Gritting his teeth, he suddenly paled and whispered:

"...and for what? Huh? For... for this? This wasn't supposed to happen. How did this happen?!"

Then, Sunny grabbed his head and forced out a dark laugh.

'This is bad... what am I even saying?'

Mistaking his terror for the sign of the liquor doing its job, Harper got a little braver:

"You must have fought side by side with Lady Nephis a lot!"

Sunny lowered his head, then shrugged.

"Yeah."

The gaunt young man hesitated for a few moments, then cautiously asked:

"So... you must have seen her Aspect Ability?"

Learn your enemy's Ability, learn their Flaw, learn their vices... that's how you kill them. Staring at Harper, Sunny suddenly remembered his first battle after meeting Nephis. Back then, she asked him if he had ever dissected a dead carapace scavenger to learn its weaknesses.

That's what the cowardly Sleeper was doing right now. Dissecting them. Even though they weren't dead... yet.

"Sure. It can be used to heal."

Harper eyes gleamed.

"So she's a healer! Of course. Such an Ability suits Lady Changing Star very well. Everyone knows that she's an angel..."

'Good...'

His first goal was achieved. Sunny had successfully created a misunderstanding, leading Harper to believe that Neph's Aspect was limited to healing. There had to be other spies in the slum, of course. With them collaborating on that statement by recounting how she had healed the wounded hunters today, Gunlaug and his people would most likely believe that Changing Star had no offensive Ability.

Who would ever assume that her flames could both heal and destroy?

Harper, meanwhile, was pouring more liquor into the cup.

"By the way, I always wanted to ask. Do you know how Lady Nephis received her True Name?"

Maybe because of his terrible state of mind, or maybe because of the liquor, or maybe simply because of a momentary lapse of judgment, Sunny didn't think his next words through well enough before answering:

"Probably the same way I did."

Then, he froze.

'Curse you!'

He was so preoccupied with creating a false image of Neph in Harper's mind that, for a second, he had forgotten to keep his own true identity a secret.

'Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!'

Not letting the panic show on his face, Sunny tried to salvage the situation by throwing his head back and laughing, creating an impression that his last statement was a joke.

Luckily, Harper seemed to believe him. He laughed, too, and then glanced at Sunny with humorous sparks in his eyes.

However, his next words sent Sunny into a cold embrace of horror. It was as though the gates of hell opened right beneath his feet.

Wishing to play along, the gaunt young man grinned and said jokingly:

"Oh! Of course, of course, Lord Sunless! What is your True Name then?"

Sunny stared at him, the smile frozen on his face.

'Think! Think! How do you get out of this?!'

But there was no way out, at least none that he could see. He was caught.

The familiar pressure appeared in his mind. Slowly, Sunny became deathly pale.

Harper was still grinning, waiting for the answer. His face was gaunt, tired, and full of both fear and desperate hope.

He was just a weak, pitiful kid, after all.

The pressure was replaced by blinding pain, sending a tremble running through Sunny's body.

Why, why did he have to ask that question?!

But it was too late. What happened couldn't be changed.

Like a cornered beast, Sunny could think of only one thing...

Harper finally sensed that something was wrong. His eyes widened.

"Sun..."

...how to survive.

Just a second before the pain overwhelmed his limits and forced out an answer, Sunny suddenly leaned forward, picked up the crude iron knife, and stabbed it through the poor young man's heart.

Chapter 162: Lost From Light

Pushing the knife into Harper's weak body, Sunny lunged forward. The flimsy wooden table flew aside and shattered into splinters once it hit the wall. With his other hand, he violently grabbed the young man's face and pressed him onto the floor, making sure that no sound would escape from his lips.

Harper's wide eyes were full of pain and terror, staring at Sunny with a silent, but deafening question.

...Why?

Feeling hot blood streaming down his hand, Sunny finally let the pain of the Flaw overwhelm him.

His whisper was hoarse and barely audible:

"Lost from Light! I am... Lost... Lost from Light..."

Harper's trembling fingers found his face and smeared it with blood, which then mixed with tears. He weakly tried to push Sunny away, but there was no strength in his arms anymore.

Biting his lips hard enough to break the skin, Sunny held the gaunt young man down and twisted the knife, praying for all of this to be over soon.

'Don't look at me... please, don't look at me...'

Finally, Harper's terrified, accusing eyes grew still and lightless. Sunny could feel the beating of his heart stop through the thin fabric of the young man's robe. Making sure that Harper was, indeed, dead, he finally let go of the knife and crawled away.

'Oh, gods...'

As though summoned by these words, the voice of the Spell whispered into his ear:

[You have slain Dreamer Harper.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Contorted in a painful spasm, Sunny bent over and violently threw up. Then he weakly fell on the floor and tried to wipe his face, only to realize that he was spreading blood all over it.

'I killed him. I just killed a real human...'

A strange stillness took hold of Sunny. Sitting on the cold stones, he stared at the corpse of the young man that he had just killed and struggled to form a cohesive thought. After a while, he finally succeeded:

'Too much... oh, this is too much...'

All of this was too much for him. Why did he have to go through all of this? The slave caravan, the Forgotten Shore, Changing Star, and now Harper. What sin had he committed to have to go through this nightmare? Was he actually already dead, and imprisoned in the depths of hell?

'...Bullshit. He deserved it.'

Sunny gritted his teeth and forced himself to concentrate on that thought.

'Why do you even feel guilty? The bastard was going to sell you out to Gunlaug. He knew that he was helping to kill you. And not just you alone. Neph, too. And Cassie.'

But no matter how hard he tried to convince himself that he had the right to kill Harper, deep down, he could not accept it. There were a million ways to deal with the timid, pitiful spy. No... there was another reason...

'Come on now... there's no one else here. Why don't you be honest with yourself, for once? Just admit it. Don't you dare become a hypocrite.'

Sunny grimaced and ground his teeth against each other.

'Say it!'

Reluctantly, he opened his mouth and whispered:

"I killed him because I wanted to survive. I killed him... because it was easy."

And just like that, he suddenly felt better.

What's the big deal? He was already a murderer, anyway.

He was planning to help Nephis kill hundreds of people.

Affected by the irony of the situation, Sunny barely stopped himself from laughing.

He didn't want to make too much noise. Breaking that table was already a mistake. What if someone comes to check on the commotion?

That would be bad. That would be embarrassing.

Right... what was he going to do with the body?

Instead of coming up with an answer, Sunny leaned forward and threw up again.

...When he sat straight after a while, the door of the hut was open.

And there, in the doorframe, his face pale, stood none other than Caster.

With a stunned expression on his face, the proud Legacy was taking in the sight. The broken table, the smell of alcohol in the air, the bloodied body with a knife sticking out of its chest, and disheveled Sunny kneeling on the floor, his hands and face smeared with fresh blood.

'Oh, no!'

"This... this is not..."

However, no words came to his mind. No matter what he would say, the situation was not going to appear any better.

Looking him straight in the eyes, Caster asked with horror in his voice:

"Sunny... what did you do?"

Sunny blinked and stared at the handsome young man. After a few moments, he opened his mouth and said:

"What do you think? I killed the bastard."

His voice was calm and nonchalant. It didn't matter how Sunny felt inside. In front of Caster, he couldn't show any weakness.

He didn't trust the proud scion of the Han Li clan one bit. There had always been something off about him.

So... if there was ever a time for acting, it was now. Especially because, unlike everyone else in the slum, Caster already knew that Sunny wasn't as useless as everyone believed. He had known it ever since that night when the three of them fought a devil together.

"Killed the... why did you kill him?!" Do you want to read more chapters ?
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Sunny stood up and shrugged.

"He was asking too many questions."

Caster opened his mind, stunned, then closed it again. After a few moments, he suddenly frowned:

"What kind of questions?"

It seemed as though he had realized something.

...Come to think of it, what was he even doing here?

"Oh, you know. Do I know Nephis well, what her Ability is, how did she get her True Name, stuff like that."

Without giving Caster the ability to react, Sunny wiped his hands with a bit of seaweed and added:

"Actually, this guy, Harper, was sent over to spy on us by Tessai. I caught him making a report to a Castle Guard officer this morning."

Caster remained silent for a while, then asked quietly:

"Do you have any proof of that?"

Sunny glared at him and raised an eyebrow.

"...Is my word not proof enough?"

A wild thought suddenly appeared in his mind.

'Will I have to kill Caster, too?'

Would he even be able to, if it came to that?

Not likely.

"Why, you don't believe me?"

Bad, bad. The situation was really bad. Depending on Caster's next words, Sunny could find himself in a sea of trouble. And he was powerless to do anything about it.

Anxious and uneasy, he stared at Caster.

The proud Legacy lingered. After a while, he came inside and closed the door behind him.

"No, I believe you. Actually, I suspected this kid myself. That's why I came here after hearing that the two of you were seen going somewhere together. But, Sunny... the others... the others might not think the same."

He smelled the air and grimaced.

"I am sorry to say that, but you have a reputation for having a bad temper. With alcohol added into the mix and no proof to connect Harper to the Castle... you can see how this does not look good."

'That piece of crap!'

Sunny scowled, trying to pretend that he was calm. He saw where this was going...

"So? What are you going to do?"

Caster gripped his shoulder. Then, in a serious and grave voice, he said:

"What else? I will help you conceal everything, of course. We are comrades, after all. But, Sunny... no one can ever know what you have done here. Especially Lady Nephis. This will be... this will be our secret. Alright?"

Saying that, he looked Sunny right in the eyes... and smiled.

Chapter 163: The Past | Shadow Slave

Sunny stared at Caster with a grim expression. Despite the amiable smile and reassuring voice, he knew what the handsome Legacy was doing.

He grew up in the outskirts, after all.

Caster had said "I will help you."

But what he actually meant was "I will own you."

Because there was no better leverage than a gruesome secret. This help of his was going to come at a price.

But what choice did Sunny have, really? Unless he was ready to fight and kill Caster right there and then, thus silencing the only witness of his crime forever, he couldn't refuse.

Plus... what Caster thought was going to happen and what would really happen was not as set in stone as it seemed. As long as Sunny was alive, there was hope of turning things around, somehow.

He just had to get through this, one step at a time.

Sunny forced out a smile.

"Thank you, Caster. I won't... won't forget it."

Then, he glanced at the dead body lying at his feet and took a step back, escaping the quickly growing puddle of blood. His face remained calm, but a small, almost imperceptible shiver ran through his body.

"So... what do we do now?"

The proud Legacy lingered, then said in a solemn tone:

"First things first, we can't let anyone see you like this. Wait here for a while. I'll bring something for you to clean yourself."

Sunny sighed. He didn't really want to stay anywhere near Harper, but Caster was right. Walking around covered in blood was a bad idea.

"And then what?"

Caster hesitated.

"Then we will need to get rid of the body. But... it won't be easy to do without being noticed, if not by slum rats, than by Guards. Don't worry, though... I'll think of something. Just wait for me to return."

Sunny hesitated, wondering if he could trust the Legacy. What was going to stop him from returning with a crowd of people? But no. Having Sunny in his pocket would benefit Caster more than getting rid of him completely.

Still, he sent the shadow to keep an eye on things after the handsome young man went away.

Left alone with the corpse, Sunny sighed and sat on the floor, resting his back against the flimsy wall of the hut. He was so tired.

The night was slowly descending on the ruins, drowning everything in comforting darkness. Of course, he could still see the bloodied body lying motionless on the stones beside him. For the first time, Sunny wished that his eyes weren't able to pierce through the shadows.

Harper's eyes were still open, staring at him accusingly.

"I am... I am stuck with you forever, aren't I?"

Without even looking into the Soul Sea, Sunny knew that a new shadow had joined the silent ranks of every creature he had ever killed.

All he could do was wait.

Time slowly crawled.

It was taking Caster a long time to gather everything needed without raising any suspicion. He had to avoid prying eyes and waste a lot of time conversing with people who constantly wanted to win his attention. At some point, even Cassie talked to him:

"Hey, Caster. Have you seen Sunny?" Do you want to read more chapters ?
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Away from their lodge, sitting on the floor near the corpse of a young man he had killed, Sunny smiled darkly and listened to what kind of excuse the Legacy would come up with to account for his absence.

After a while, his thoughts began to wander. He listened to the sound of rain falling on the stones outside and scowled. Rain always put him in a bad mood.

Because of it, Sunny was always reminded of the past.

Unlike Nephis, whose past was clouded in mystery and screamed of tragedy, he came from a simple background. His story was more mundane than tragic. A trivial story of unfortunate people living hard and bitterly in a dying world.

Sunny's parents were both menial workers. They were poor, but not destitute. His dad was employed by one of the numerous maintenance crews that took care of the city's outer barriers. His mom worked in an underground factory that produced air filtration systems. Together, their income was barely enough to afford a small cell in one of the human hives in the outskirts.

Several months after his sister, Rain, was born, when Sunny was around four, his father was killed in a work accident, which was not a rare occurrence among the city maintenance workers. Three years after that, his mother got sick and eventually passed away. Factory workers like her often got sick and died due to the harsh conditions, so it wasn't a rare outcome, either.

Sunny and Rain were sent to a government child care facility. His sister was young and cute, so she was eventually adopted. Sunny, however, was older and had "behavioral problems", which made him pretty much completely undesirable. After enduring a few years in a series of increasingly vile foster homes, he finally managed to run away and learned how to survive on the streets of the outskirts.

Out there on the streets, there were a lot of kids just like him, who had to do all sorts of distasteful things every day just to live to see another sunrise. However, even then, most of them didn't last long. It took a very special kind of creature to survive there.

Sunny was one such creature.

A part of this was pure luck, a part of it was that he was smart. But mostly, it was because he had a goal. Sunny refused to die before finding his sister.

Somehow, he had convinced himself that she was waiting for him to find and save her. One day, they were going live happily again, like a family, together. This misguided goal kept him alive more than anything else.

...Of course, it didn't end well.

Nothing ever did in this damn world.

Sitting just a few centimeters away from a puddle of human blood, Sunny chuckled and rubbed his face.

Was there even such a thing as a happy ending?

'What is taking that bastard so long?'

Granted, he knew exactly where Caster was, and what he was doing.

Currently, he was raising his hand to open the door of Harper's hut.

Sunny tiredly picked himself up from the floor and shook off the weight of reminiscence.

What was the point of remembering the past? He had to survive the future...

Chapter 164: Farewell | Shadow Slave

Caster brought him water, strips of cloth, and a crude tunic.

While Sunny was washing the blood off his body, the proud Legacy carefully moved Harper's corpse into a corner, buried it under the pile of seaweed thatch, and wiped the blood off the floor as much as he could.

This way, an accidental glance inside the hut would not reveal too much. Of course, even a little bit of scrutiny, and the signs of what had happened here would become apparent.

While doing all this, Caster was speaking:

"The easiest way to get rid of a corpse is to simply toss it off the platform. With luck, it won't land on the road. But even if it does, no one would pay it a lot of attention. People die all the time out here in the Dark City, especially those living in the outer settlement."

He paused, then continued:

"However, we can't do that — because Harper isn't just a random slum rat, but someone who was working for the Bright Lord. The Guards will become interested in his sudden death, and they'll use it to create trouble for you and Lady Nephis. So we need to make him disappear completely. That won't be easy."

Sunny glanced at him and frowned.

"What's the big deal? I can just carry him down the hill and dump the body somewhere in the ruins. It's night outside. No one will see anything."

Caster shook his head.

"Castle Guard has various types of observers watching the road day and night. You will be noticed. Unless someone persuades them to look the other way, of course."

He sighed.

"It won't be cheap, but I can make it happen. Tomorrow after sunset, you will have about an hour to carry the body to the ruins and return. Sorry, but I can't buy you more time... this will wipe what little shards I have left already."

His voice sounded as though the handsome young man was genuinely concerned for his comrade, but in reality, he was just reiterating how much Sunny owed him now.

And if that message was not enough, he could always threaten to reveal the secret of how Harper died in the future.

Caster had him in the palm of his hand.

Sunny smiled darkly.

"And what do I do until then?"

The Legacy shrugged:

"Just act natural and try not to speak to anyone. You're kind of a loner as it is. No one will suspect anything."

After that, he thought for a few moments and added:

"Oh. This... no one should enter this hut for a long while. Harper lived in the castle for these past few months, so people in the slum won't notice his absence yet. Neither will Guards, since he made a report recently. We should be fine."

Sunny stared at him with a strange expression. Do you want to read more chapters?

"What?"

He shook his head.

"No, nothing. I'm just wondering how many bodies did you make disappear already."

Caster frowned.

"This is my first, actually. In the Dark City, it is usually more advantageous to leave the body somewhere where everyone can see."

Made sense. Why kill someone if not to make others think twice before attacking you in the future?

Sunny was a real amateur when it came to murder. He really could not compete with the Legacies.

Just like that, they left the pitiful hut behind and returned to the lodge. With no one paying him any attention, Sunny returned to his room and sat quietly on his narrow cot.

He thought that he wouldn't be able to sleep this night, tormented by both the knowledge of what Nephis was planning and the memories of Harper dying by his hand.

But in the end, his exhausted consciousness slipped into oblivion as soon as his head touched the pillow.

In the morning, he woke up with a start, expecting a crowd of furious slum dwellers to be rushing inside, all eager to...

Well, what could they really do? If push came to shove, very few of them could actually harm him.

But no one was there.

After hesitating for a while, he decided to act as he would on any other day. Leaving his room, Sunny walked outside to wash his face.

Neph's little helpers either greeted or ignored him, just like usual. Their smiles were friendly and fleeting.

No one looked at him twice.

Strangely disturbed, Sunny escaped the lodge and looked up at the sky.

Nothing had changed. Everything was the same as it had been yesterday, and every day before that.

How could... how could this be?

He had violently murdered someone, but no one seemed to care. The world had moved on without Harper, indifferent to the pain and horror that were now frozen forever in the dead eyes of the timid, pitiful young man.

Even the Guards did not seem to notice the disappearance of their spy.

Sunny rubbed his face, hiding a pained grimace. His head hurt with a terrible migraine.

'If they don't care, why should I? Forget about that fool.'

But he did care. Irrational as it was, he felt compelled to mourn the death of his victim, even if he was the only one who would. Maybe because this situation was eerily identical to how he had always imagined his own death to happen, utterly unnoticed.

Discarded and forgotten, with not a single soul to care that he had ever existed.

'Pathetic.'

Returning inside, Sunny entered his room and sat on the cot, staring at the wall.

He spent most of the day there, going out only once to pretend to train with the Midnight Shard. While he was repeating the katas, he thought that he caught sight of Nephis observing the movements of his sword with a frown

on her face. But a second later, she was distracted and drawn away by the neverending torrent of tasks required of her.

'Good riddance! Go chat with Caster, see if I care!' Come to p a n d a-n o v e l, c o m

His sudden anger surprised Sunny.

Well, at least it was better than the grim apathy that reigned over him this whole day.

'What's wrong with my mind lately? It's like I'm back on the Ashen Barrow.'

Frowning, he dismissed the Midnight Shard and returned to his room.

However, someone was waiting for him there. It was Cassie.

The blind girl stood silently with her back to the door, holding the wooden staff in her hands. Her face was unusually still. It almost looked... bleak.

Sunny's heart skipped a bit.

'Did she... did she find out?'

Forcing out a fake grin, he made his voice sound cheerful and said:

"Oh, hey Cas. Do you want something?"

She turned to him and, after a moment of hesitation, smiled. However, something about her smile was off.

It was almost as though it was as forced as his own.

The blind girl lingered, then said:

"No, nothing in particular."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'What's up with her today?'

Meanwhile, Cassie raised her hand and found his shoulder.

"No... actually, I have a present for you."

He raised his eyebrow.

"A... present?"

She nodded. In the next moment, a spark of energy suddenly traveled from her body into his.

Sunny flinched.

[You have received a Memory: Endless Spring.]

Wasn't it... that pretty glass bottle of hers, one that contained an almost endless amount of water?

Why was she giving it to him?

"Why are you gifting me this all of a sudden?"

She was silent for a few moments, then gently shook her head.

"I just wanted to. Why? Can't I give you something, after everything that you have done for us?"

Sunny hesitated.

"I guess you can. I just didn't expect it."

Cassie gripped his shoulder and remained motionless for a weirdly long amount of time. Then, she looked away and said, her voice light and even:

"We'll meet again soon, Sunny."

'Weirdo.'

He patted her hand and said, a little embarrassed.

"Of course we will. Where would I go? This lodge is too small for us not to bump into each other all the time anyway."

She slowly removed her hand and chuckled.

"Yeah. You're right, of course. I'll... I'll go now."

With that, she turned away and headed for the door.

Sunny stared at her back and shrugged.

"Alright. Bye."

'What has gotten into her?'

Reaching the doorway, Cassie froze for a second. Without turning her head and letting him see her face, she lingered for a while, then quietly said:

"...Goodbye, Sunny."

Chapter 165: Power | Shadow Slave

For the rest of the day, Sunny had nothing to do but count the hours until sunset. When the night descended, he would have to return to the scene of the crime he had committed, retrieve the body of his victim, and carry it into the ruins under the cover of darkness.

'How did it come to this?'

Alone in his tiny room, he stared at the wall and waited. Soon, the fear of going into the Dark City at night overpowered the bleak and hollow feeling that reigned over his soul.

People rarely risked leaving the hill after the dark. In the starless void of the Forgotten Shore, any source of light was bound to attract the attention of creatures that no human would even want to meet. Countless horrors stalked the streets of the city at night.

Only a madman would risk entering the ruins after the sun was gone.

...Of course, there were plenty of madmen in the Dark City.

Sunny, at least didn't need any light. He also knew the area surrounding the Bright Castle well enough to avoid most danger. The weeks he had spent learning from Effie didn't go to waste.

'I should be fine.'

With the shadows hiding his every movement, Sunny was sure of his ability to at least run away should something happen.

Still, with each passing minute, his heart felt colder and colder. When the shadow of the Crimson Spire drowned the world and colored his thoughts with the eerie feeling of dread, he gritted his teeth.

'It's almost time.'

However, before the sun completely disappeared, another unexpected guest appeared at the doorstep of his room.

Looking at Sunny with a scowl, Nephis gestured for him to stand up and said in an even tone:

"Come with me."

Sunny's heart skipped a bit.

'What... what does she want?'

Suppressing the sickly fear of being caught, he lingered for a few moments, then slowly stood up and followed Changing Star out of the lodge.

Together, the two of them walked to a secluded part of the slum. Neph remained silent, not even looking in his direction. She seemed calm, like always.

Sunny, however, struggled to keep himself from panicking. Various thoughts, one darker than the other, found their way into his head.

'Did that bastard, Caster, tell her everything?' Do you want to read more chapters?

Finally, they reached the remote alley where no one would have been able to overhear their conversation. It was filled with nothing but the crimson light of sunset and deep shadows.

Turning around, Changing Star looked at him with a frown. Sunny met her gaze, his face grim. He felt as though he was staring at his judge and executioner.

"I've seen you practicing with the sword today. Your moves were weak and aimless. It was as if you had lost all clarity. What were you thinking about?"

Sunny slowly exhaled.

So, that's what this was about. She didn't know anything. She just picked up on the turmoil raging in his mind.

He should have felt relieved, but for some reason, Sunny felt anger rising in his chest instead.

With a crooked smile, he looked away and answered:

"Murder. I was thinking about murder."

Nephis tilted her head, waiting for an explanation. Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then said, his voice strangely cold:

"You once told me that the essence of combat is murder, didn't you?"

She gave him a nod.

He stared at her, then said:

"Well, how come you know so much about murder, Neph? Huh? I wanted to ask you that since the day you cut off Andel's head without so much as batting an eye. You are out here preaching about how we are all fellow humans, not some beasts. Was Andel not human?" Come to p a n d a-n o v e l, c o m

She scowled.

"Is this what it's all about?"

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"It's a part of it."

Nephis was silent for a long time. At some point, she absentmindedly raised one arm and rubbed her neck. Finally, she said:

"It's not that I have murdered a lot of people. It's that a lot of people have tried to murder me."

Sunny blinked.

"Why would anyone want to kill you?"

She smiled.

"Why? All kinds of reasons, really. My family was really powerful once, don't you remember? But power... it's a dangerous thing, Sunny. You can't reach its peak without creating a lot of enemies. And when your power disappears one day, all those enemies remain."

Turning her face away, she said with her usual indifferent voice:

"I think I was what... five, six years old when someone tried to kill me for the first time? It was my nanny. She led me to an empty room, put her hands around my neck, and tried to strangle me. I thought that it was a game. For the first few seconds, at least."

Neph looked at him with white sparks dancing in her eyes.

"That was how I learned what weakness is. And when my teacher, who happened to walk by, rushed inside and used his Aspect Ability to kill her... that was how I learned what strength is. So yes. I'm not a stranger to severed heads, Sunny. Is that what you wanted to know?"

He stared at her, then slowly shook his head.

How frightened she must have felt, how powerless. Powerlessness... he knew how it felt all too well. Somehow, Sunny had never imagined that proud and indomitable Changing Star had tasted it, too. Was shaped by it.

Just like he was.

Meanwhile, Nephis smiled. But there was no humor in her eyes.

"So then, what did you want to know? Huh, Sunny? What is this all about? Do you think I haven't noticed the way you were staring at me ever since we fought the Spire Messenger? Come clean with it. You owe me at least this much."

He glared at her for a long time, a storm of emotions written on his pale, grim face. Finally making a decision, Sunny gritted his teeth and said:

"I want to know what your real goal is. I want to know if it's all worth it."

Chapter 166: Light And Shadows

Changing Star frowned. There was a hint of surprise visible in her cold, grey eyes.

"My... goal? Isn't it obvious?"

She gestured to the slum that surrounded them and the magnificent castle towering above it.

"I'm trying to help these people. What else?"

Sunny sighed.

Then, turning his face away, he asked:

"Hey, have I ever told you about my sister?"

Nephis blinked.

"No. Why bring this up all of the sudden?"

He smiled wistfully.

"I just was reminded of her recently, so I thought I'd share. You see... our parents died when we were little. She got adopted, but I ended up on the streets. Life wasn't really sweet for me. In fact, it was nothing but unsavory and bitter. So, young as I was, I simply imagined that it was the same for her. That's why I got obsessed with the idea of finding her. I had this fantasy in my head, you know, of saving and protecting her. Becoming a family again."

Sunny grimaced.

"But how could a penniless undesirable like me find anyone? You know how the city databases are. Even if they're functional, unsealing anything requires you to be a citizen, and one of a considerable rank, too. However, I

was ready to do anything to accomplish my goal. So, I saved up money. A street kid can't earn much, but even then, I saved up as much as I could."

A dark expression appeared on his face.

"Even if I had almost nothing to eat, I would keep putting away the pathetic amount of credits I had earned through doing all kinds of horrid crap. And after four or five years of this, by the time I was nearly seventeen, I finally had enough to hire a private investigator."

He smiled.

"You see, there was this detective who sometimes hired us nobodies to gather information for him. His services weren't cheap, but I trusted him. Or in him, at least. So I gave all my money to that guy and told him to find my sister. And you know what? He did. One day, about a month after we made the deal, he gave me a piece of paper with an address written on it. So I went there."

Nephis hesitated for a few moments, then asked in a quiet voice:

"So what happened? Did you meet your sister?"

Sunny rubbed his face, glanced at the sky, and said:

"Sort of. I actually met her near the tram terminal. Only at that time, I didn't recognize her. You see, despite my lofty ideas of being her savior, I couldn't even really remember what she looked like. There was this girl, around twelve years old, wearing a tidy school uniform. She was walking in the same direction as me. I only realized that it was her after she entered the house from the address."

He was silent for a while, then continued, his voice strangely emotionless:

"It was already dark. I think it was raining. The house was situated in a really nice district. They actually had the whole house to themselves. Just one family living in it, can you imagine? Well, I guess you can. Anyway... there was even a lawn. And a window... a big window that shined light

outside. Watching them through that window was almost like watching a television show."

Sunny remembered the splendor of it, his own embarrassing astonishment, and tried to smile. However, he failed.

"Standing in the shadows just outside the edge of that light, I observed her family for a while. She had parents who loved her and treated her well. She had real food, and enough of it to never go hungry. She had pretty clothes and expensive textbooks. She even had cute younger siblings. They were all smiling, laughing, and having a great time together."

Neph looked at him and asked:

"So what did you do?"

Sunny didn't answer immediately. Instead, he remembered how he just stood there, watching those happy people. How he looked down at his own frail body, his dirty and ragged clothes, the bruises on his bloodied knuckles. And realized how utterly out of place he was in that picture.

After years of dreaming of finding his sister and saving her, he was faced with the simple fact that she... she never really needed him. She probably didn't even remember that he existed. More than that, returning into her life would not bring anything good to her. He didn't have anything pleasant or beneficial to offer. He could only make things worse.

[Do you want to read more chapters ? Come to Panda-novel.com] Out there on that dark and rainy night, while Sunny was standing in the shadows, something in his heart was extinguished forever. Something inside him died.

No matter what kind of situation he would find himself in after this, nothing would really compare to the darkness he felt in that single moment.

After remaining motionless for a long time, he slowly backed away, turned around, and walked into the darkness.

...A few days after that, he began showing the first symptoms of being infected by the Nightmare Spell.

And the rest was history.

Shaking off the unpleasant memories, Sunny pretended to be carefree and shrugged.

"I did the only selfless thing that I have ever done. I turned around and went away. Do you know why?"

Nephis slowly shook her head.

Sunny grinned, the anger finally finding its way into his eyes.

"Because even a cretin like me was able to realize that the person he wanted to save didn't need his saving. So please tell me, Neph, why is it that you, with all your intelligence and clarity, can't seem to do the same?"

She stared at him, a deep frown appearing on her face.

"Are you implying that I lied about my intention to help these people? If so, you are wrong."

Sunny clenched his fists. Before he could stop himself, words flew out of his mouth.

...No. To be completely honest with himself, he had to admit that he simply did not want to stop them. He was too exhausted, hurting, and shaken to keep playing this game with Neph. It was time to bring everything to light.

Maybe then, he would be able to regain clarity.

Glaring at Changing Star, Sunny spat:

"...Fuck you, Neph."

She blinked.

"What?"

He smiled crookedly.

"I said go fuck yourself with that bullshit... Saint Nephis. You might have fooled everyone else, but I know you. I know you better than anyone else. So I don't buy your whole savior act even for a second."

Sunny repeated her gesture, pointing at the surrounding hovels.

"Help these people? Please! What are you going to help them with? Help them turn into corpses? You and I both know how this ends. Cassie already told us. Fire and rivers of blood, right? Is this what you're planning?"

Nephis stared at him, a dark expression written on her ivory face. Her cold grey eyes weren't calm anymore. Finally, there was a burning emotion in them. Was it... confusion? Pain? Disappointment?

She opened her mouth, then closed it again. Then, Changing Star slowly shook her head.

Finally, she seemed to find the right words. Looking Sunny right in the eyes, she slightly raised her chin and said:

"...Fine. You got me."

Chapter 167: Unforgivable | Shadow Slave

Sunny stared at Nephis, stunned by her answer. He didn't expect her to admit it so easily.

Meanwhile, she just shrugged.

"What? Was I supposed to deny it? Why should I? You are the one who is obsessed with lies, Sunny, not me."

The corner of Changing Star's mouth twitched.

"Actually, I have to thank you. If it wasn't for you, I would have never learned how to deceive people so easily. I had a very sheltered upbringing, for obvious reasons. Communicating with others had always been something I knew very little about."

She smiled darkly.

"How fortunate it was to meet you, of all people, on this forsaken shore. Lucky me. Right?"

Sunny blinked. What was she talking about? He remembered how, during their journey to the Dark City, Nephis had tried to mimic Cassie in how she spoke to people. Had she been studying him, too?

Neph took a step forward and pierced him with an intense, burning gaze.

"No one survives in the Dream Realm alone. I knew that I won't be an exception to this rule, so I watched Cassie and you and tried my hardest to learn from you both. That's when I noticed that nothing you ever said — or did — was true. Wasn't it?"

'Crap.'

Sunny felt a cold shiver running down his spine.

She scoffed.

"No matter what happened, you somehow always managed to keep your real thoughts, desires, and reasons hidden. I've never seen anyone so adept at deception. Congratulations, Sunny! The mind games you played with us were almost as devious as the mental hex of the Soul Devourer. It was nothing short of inspiring."

Changing Star paused and shook her head.

"You can even easily turn truths into lies. How... brilliant. I never even knew that such a thing was possible. Silly me. I didn't know a lot of things before I met you."

She smiled.

"So, you see... while you were learning how to use a sword from me, I was learning how to use people from you. So please, Sunny, accept my sincere gratitude. I could not have wished for a better teacher. Without you, none of this would have been possible!"

Nephis raised her hand and stabbed a finger at him. Then, with anger in her voice, she spat:

"So where do you get the audacity to blame me for doing the same thing you do to everyone you ever meet?"

Sunny trembled. Was she telling the truth? Did Neph actually learn how to be this manipulative and vile... from him?

'Oh, no...'

Someone that inexperienced couldn't have found a worse role model even if they tried. What a cruel twist of fate, to be sent into the Dream Realm together with a damaged, vicious man like him...

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"That's not the same..."

Changing Star scowled.

"How is what I am doing different? I haven't told a single lie to these people. I gave them just enough truth to make them deceive themselves, just like you taught me. But what, now that it was turned around on you, it is suddenly not fair? Now you won't settle for anything less than the whole truth?"

She smirked.

"Fine. I'll tell you. Yes, you are right. There's going to be fire and rivers of blood. That is my plan. So what? How is it worse than this pathetic, hopeless existence? It isn't. I am going to kill Gunlaug. After he is dead, the Bright Castle will become engulfed in a civil war, with each of the five lieutenants vying for the throne. I am going to kill them, too. And when I am the last one standing..."

Her eyes glistened.

"...I will gather those of us who remain alive and make a road of bones for the lucky few to reach the Gateway. That is my promise. That is the salvation I offer to the people of Dark City — a chance to return to the real world or die like a human should, standing tall and with a sword in their hand, instead of living in fear like a rat! I thought that you, of all people, would understand."

[Do you want to read more chapters ? Come to Panda-novel.com] Sunny stared at her in disbelief. How could... how could she be so nonchalant about the idea of causing the deaths of so many people? Had their lives no value in her eyes?

But then he realized that he was looking at it all wrong. He was looking at it from his own perspective, the perspective of someone who was used to surviving at all costs, to putting survival above all else. However, that was how his old self had viewed the world.

After coming to the Forgotten Shore, Sunny had learned that there were things more valuable than staying alive. And he learned it from Neph.

To her, a life that was not worth living was that much worse than a worthy death. Maybe, in her mind, she really was trying to help these people.

But who gave her the right to make that decision on their behalf?

Shaking his head, he whispered:

"Is it really so terrible to live here? Is Gunlaug really so bad that you would rather see all of us die than let us remain under his rule?"

A dark expression appeared on Changing Star's face. With cold contempt ringing in her voice, she said:

"Gunlaug has done many despicable things. But I won't judge him for those. Who knows if any of us would have done any better? Keeping a thousand hopeless people alive in this hell is the kind of task that can turn a saint into a demon. No... there is only one crime he committed that I can never forgive."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Which one?"

She lowered her chin and gritted her teeth:

"It's that he gave up."

She looked at Sunny and said, her voice full of intensity:

"It's that he never even tried to reach the Gateway. With so many years to prepare and hundreds of powerful fighters under his command... do you really think that there was nothing he could do to enter the Crimson Spire? No... no, he simply changed his mind. Why return if he can live like a king here, in the Dark City? He abandoned his duty as an Awakened and submitted to the Spell."

...And because of how he reigned, destroying people before they grew powerful enough to threaten his rule, Gunalug also prevented anyone else from trying.

However, Sunny glimpsed something else from what Nephis had said. A hint of her true motivation. The words she chose to condemn Gunlaug were just too peculiar.

Despite the fact that the Bright Lord had committed all sorts of atrocious acts and caused the deaths, humiliation, and sorrow of countless people, the thing that enraged Changing Star the most was not his corruption and cruelty, but something entirely different.

The fact that he had submitted to the Spell and failed to complete his trial. Considering which family she hailed from...

Was this the key to her mysterious goal?

Frowning, Sunny asked:

"Don't you think that, maybe, he just wasn't willing to see hundreds of people die? All these young men and women living in the outer settlement and the Bright Castle... how many of them are you ready to sacrifice to achieve your goal?"

He grew silent, afraid that her answer would confirm his suspicion.

Neph straightened her back and glanced at him. Once again, her eyes were firm and calm. Without pausing to think, she said, not a shadow of a doubt in her voice:

"All of them. Of course."

Chapter 168: Outside | Shadow Slave

Sunny grimaced and turned away, feeling a terrible headache. The sun was almost gone, and the night was following in its footsteps. He didn't have much time left.

With a desperate smile, Sunny looked at Changing Star and asked:

"What can be so damn important? What can be so valuable that you are ready to condemn everyone here to death?!"

He shook his head, guessing that he already knew.

"Don't tell me that it's some stupid crap like bringing the glory of the Immortal Flame clan back. Duty of the Awakened? What, you gave a terrible oath to become the first human to conquer the Fourth Nightmare, like your father conquered the Third, and your grandfather the Second? Or even worse, is it something even more foolish? Are you planning to save the damn world?!"

Nephis stared at him for a few moments, and then grinned. Something dangerous and unfamiliar awakened in her eyes... no, not completely unfamiliar.

It was the same strange, maniacal glimmer he had seen once before, right after saying the three strange words to her.

Aster, Song, Vale.

Back then, for a few moments, Changing Star had turned from a calm and composed young woman into someone he wasn't sure he recognized anymore.

With a soft chuckle, Neph shook her head.

"Save the world? No, I'm not going to save the world, Sunny."

Then, the smile disappeared from her face, and white flames suddenly ignited in the depths of her cold, grey eyes. With dark and frightening conviction, she said:

"I'm going to destroy it."

Her words echoed in the darkness, making Sunny feel an irrational feeling of dread. He stared at her, both failing to comprehend and afraid to believe in what she had just heard.

Destroy... the world? What?

Deeply inhaling the cool air, Changing Star looked up at the sky.

"This world, Sunny. This cursed place. The Dream Realm. No, I won't be the first one to conquer the Fourth Nightmare. I will be the first one to conquer every Nightmare. I'll go through them one after another, destroying anything and anyone who stands in my way. And when I get to the heart of the Nightmare Spell, I'm going to obliterate every part of it, I'm going to rip it to shreds, I'm going to decimate and bring it to ruin."

She looked him in the eyes and said:

"You think Gunlaug can stop me? You think a Fallen Terror can stop me? Those three ghouls can stop me? No, Sunny. Nothing will stop me. Anyone who dares will die. I'll kill them all."

Taking a step back, Sunny stared at her with wide eyes.

He shivered, feeling something cold touch the back of his neck. Then, he grimaced and asked, a hint of anguish in his voice:

"Why? Why do you want to destroy the Spell so much?"

A corner of Changing Star's mouth curled up slightly. After a few moments, she simply said:

"Because I hate it."

Sunny blinked, stunned by the simplicity of that answer. If it was someone else, he would have thought that they were lying.

But Nephis lived in a strange, stark world. She did things simply because she wanted to, and apparently wanted to destroy an eternal, omnipotent existence simply because she hated it.

Why the hell not?

He closed his eyes and whispered.

"You are actually insane."

Neph smiled.

"What does it mean to be insane in a world that has gone mad? I would be wary of anyone who remained perfectly sane in this hell."

Then, she sighed.

"So, are we done here? Or do you have more questions? The sun is almost gone, so you'd better hurry up and ask them."

Sunny shook his head and said, his voice hoarse:

"...Yeah. Yeah, Neph. I'm done."

With that, he slowly turned around and took a step forward.

Left behind, Nephis frowned.

"Where are you going? Come back here."

He waved a hand and said in a suppressed tone, refusing to turn his head:

"Sorry. I have an errand to run. We'll... talk some other time."

Her frown deepened. Looking at his back, Changing Star gritted her teeth and called:

"I said come back, Sunny! This conversation isn't over! Come back here right now!"

But there was no answer.

Sunny had already disappeared into the shadows, leaving her standing alone in the alley that was brightly lit by the last light of the dying sunset.

Some time later, Sunny was walking through the ruins, Harper's dead body weighing on his shoulder. The young man was very gaunt back before he had been killed, so it wasn't much of a burden.

...Physically, at least.

It was the early hour of the night.

Surrounded by nothing but darkness, Sunny was left alone with his thoughts and emotions. But, strangely, both his heart and mind were empty. He couldn't be bothered to think or feel anything right now.

It was all just too much and too sudden.

Plus, he would much rather concentrate on not stumbling on some horrific monster. Ending up eaten by a Nightmare Creature right now would be very ironic, but still unpleasant.

He felt guilty about murdering Harper, but not enough to die while trying to dispose of the body. He would much prefer not to die for his sins.

Luckily, the area he was traversing was familiar to Sunny. He knew which streets were comparatively safe, and which he needed to avoid. Where the really horrible monsters lives, and where he could pass without being sensed by anything.

Finally judging that he was far away into the ruins, he found a partially collapsed house, climbed over the rubble, then hesitated for a few moments

and threw the corpse inside. Harper's gaunt body rolled down the rocks and disappeared into the interior of the house, where no one would ever see it.

Here, done. That part, at least, was finished.

It was time to go back.

Sunny turned around and stared at the distant silhouette of the tall hill, with the magnificent castle standing on its top.

Right now, hundreds of people were sleeping there, either in the pitiful hovels of the outer settlement or in the safe and warm rooms of the ancient stronghold.

Neph, Cassie, and Effie were there.

Harus, Gemma, and Gunlaug the Bright Lord were there, too.

And many, many others.

And most of them were going to die.

Looking at the white marble walls of the castle, Sunny could see his future vividly. Watching helplessly as Changing Star builds here sect. Helping her defend herself from Gunlaug. Going on hunts, being invisible once he comes back. Afraid to get close to anyone, lest the same thing that happened to Harper repeats itself.

Up until the moment everything ends in bloodshed and terror.

Caster was there, too, waiting to use his leverage over Sunny to make him his obedient minion. Sunny wasn't deceived by the amiable personality of the handsome Legacy. He knew that nothing good was going to come of accepting his help.

...In the end, he just stood in the shadows and looked into the distance, at the tiny human enclave that persevered against all odds in the cursed nightmare of the Forgotten Shore like a lone glimmer of light.

After remaining motionless for a long time, Sunny quietly sighed, turned his back to it, and slowly walked into the darkness.

Chapter 169: Back To The Future

Three months later, Sunny was back at the castle.

Well, to be precise, he had returned here once before, to buy a few items that were hard to come by in the ruins. However, back then, Nephis and her cohort had been away on a hunt.

No such luck today. The moment he had been dreading for so long was finally here.

Hearing Changing Stat's voice, Sunny slowly turned around, glanced at her, and forced out a smile:

"Hey, Neph. Long time no see."

He tried to sound casual, but a slight tremble betrayed the storm of emotions raging in his heart.

Why did she have to be here?!

The turmoil of their sudden meeting was exasperated by the fact of how different they looked. The past months only made Nephis appear more radiant and splendid. Her white armor was pristine and graceful, her silver hair clean and combed. Sunny, on the other hand, looked like a pile of dirt that had somehow come to life. Both he and the Puppeteer's Shroud had seen better days.

He didn't want to see her, but even more than that, he didn't want her to see him in this sorry state. What if Neph gets the ridiculous idea that he was somehow miserable after falling out with her?

Nonsense! He was doing better than ever. He lived in a palace, ate delicious food every day, and had even become incredibly wealthy. If anyone should be miserable, it would be her...

"You do realize that you said that out loud, do you?"

Sunny blinked, remembered where he was, and stared at Changing Star in shock:

"Huh... what?"

She smiled with a corner of her mouth.

"You just zoned out and mumbled "why did she have to be here" under your breath. That was not very polite."

Sunny hid his embarrassment behind a grin and said.

"Yeah, well... I meant it."

Neph sighed.

"I'm glad to see you too, Sunny. It's good that you're alive."

Trying to conceal his discomfort, he shrugged.

"What, you didn't expect me to survive without you?"

She looked at him for a while and slightly shook her head.

"No. On the contrary, I knew that you would be fine."

Then, she paused for a moment and added in a flat tone:

"After all, a cockroach like you is not easy to kill."

Sunny scoffed.

"Now who's being impolite?"

Nephis stared at him in confusion for a couple of moments, then chuckled.

"Oh, sorry. I meant it as a compliment..."

He was glad to see Neph, too. As much as Sunny wanted to deny it, he had desperately missed her calm presence. Somewhere along the way, without even noticing, he had grown reliant on having her by his side.

But meeting her was also a nightmare.

After all, nothing had really changed after their bitter quarrel. Even though the intensity of it all diminished, the future that Cassie had foretold was still inevitable.

Now that the initial shock of running into Changing Star disappeared, Sunny took a closer look at her.

Nephis looked... stronger. He didn't know how much soul essence she had been able to absorb while he was gone, but it seemed like it was a lot. Neph was always confident and arresting, but now, her presence grew to a completely new level.

But then again, he was not the same weak fool either. The Dark City had made him into a fearsome creature as well. The months he had spent hunting monsters in the absolute darkness of the cursed ruins turned him stronger, smarter, and much more deadly.

...If a little bit insane.

Sunny doubted that any human on the Forgotten Shore had killed as many powerful Nightmare Creatures as he had in the same amount of time. At least not in single combat.

'Don't go on a tangent and forget where you are again!'

With a flinch, Sunny realized that he had been silent for a long time. An awkward silence hung between them, threatening to make him look bad.

'Uh. I need to say something. Like... how have you been? No, that's a stupid question! How about...'

However, before he could speak, Nephis asked:

"So what brings you to the Bright Castle? Are you... are you back?"

Startled, he scratched the back of his head and scrambled to find an answer:

"Oh, you know. Just... doing some shopping."

She blinked.

"Shopping?"

"Wait, did that sound weird?"

Sunny's eyes widened.

"Wait, did I say that out loud again?!"

He slapped his mouth shut and looked at Changing Star in horror.

'Goddamit! Who knew that a habit of talking to myself would be so detrimental to keeping my dignity intact?!'

On the ground next to him, the shadow was having a swell time basking in his anguish. It was shaking its head and dying laughing.

Several seconds later, Sunny was finally able to speak again:

"Uh, yeah. Shopping. I have some soul shards to spare, so I wanted to buy a Memory. Or few."

Nephis looked at him for a while, then said:

"I see."

Then, she turned away and asked, her voice calm and even, as always:

"Do you want to go somewhere and talk?"

Sunny's heart skipped a bit. He gritted his teeth.

"Sorry. No can do. I'm... uh... waiting for someone."

Changing Star lingered for a few moments, then asked:

"You're hiding in that alley because you're... waiting for someone? Who are you waiting for, Sunny?"

He waved a hand.

"Oh, you know. A friend. Well... more like an associate, really. An acquaintance?"

Neph remained silent for a few moments, then said in an even tone:

"You can just say no. No need to invent some..."

But right at that moment, an enchanting voice came from the entrance of the alley:

"Sunny? Hey, are you here?"

Turning around, Sunny saw a beautiful young man with gorgeous auburn hair and mesmerizing green eyes enter the alley. He was wearing an armor made out of burnished brown leather and blue silk clothes beneath, all of which fit him perfectly. On his face, there was a bright smile.

It was Kai... Night... whatever his name was!

Sunny exhaled with relief.

"What do you mean, 'invent'?! See, he's right..."

However, the words died on his lips. Because, when he turned to Changing Star, he saw something that he had never seen before.

Looking at the young man whom he had set free from the bottomless dark well, Nephis took a step back. Her face was pale, and her eyes were wide and glassy.

She seemed to be consumed by absolute, utter horror...

Chapter 170: Star-Crossed | Shadow Slave

Sunny had never seen Nephis show fear before, not to mention being truly horrified.

Instantly, every muscle in his body tensed, and a cold shiver ran through it.

'It can't be, it can't be!'

She was a person who faced demons and fearsome abominations without even flinching. What could scare her so much?

Was he mistaken? Was Kai an incarnation of some primordial evil after all? How could this be?!

Panicking, he turned back to face the charming young man and outstretched one arm, ready to summon the Midnight Shard. Not that it would help if even Changing Star was scared...

...But, to his surprise, Kai wasn't showing any signs of being an ancient terror. In fact, he was looking at him with a cute expression of confusion.

"Uh, Sunny? Who is your friend?"

No, it didn't make any sense. Not only was Sunny sure of his judgment, he had also seen multiple people greeting Night as though they knew and liked him. He couldn't be a Nightmare Creature.

Then what was wrong with Nephis?

Keeping his shadow's gaze on the charming archer, Sunny slowly turned back and glanced at Changing Star. She was still standing there, seemingly paralyzed by fear.

What was going on?

"Uh... Neph?"

She flinched and tore her eyes away from Kai. After a few seconds, Changing Star cautiously leaned forward and whispered:

"Sunny... what is Night doing here?"

He frowned.

"He's the friend I was telling you about."

She lingered, then shook her head:

"No, I mean what is he doing here?"

The emphasis was on the word "here".

'Where else would he be?'

Completely lost, Sunny struggled to understand what was going on. Maybe she knew something about the kidnapping? That didn't make sense. Finally, he said:

"I saved his life in the ruins, so he's doing me a favor in return."

Nephis stared at him with desperation, then shook her head again:

"No, I mean what is Night doing here, on the Forgotten Shore!"

Sunny scowled.

"Did you guys know each other in the real world?"

Nephis looked at him with a funny expression. She opened her mouth, then closed it again.

Finally, she forced herself to speak:

"You... you don't know who he is?"

Meanwhile, Kai, who was politely staying silent through this whole weird conversation, smiled dazzlingly and said:

"He really doesn't. Isn't it wonderful?"

Sunny gave him a dark look.

"How would I know who he is? Make sense, please."

Neph was silent for a while, then loudly whispered:

"That's Night, you idiot! Night from Nightingale! The Night!"

What was she going on about?! He had no idea what that meant!

Sunny rubbed his face with irritation:

"What are you talking about? What is a Nightingale?"

Nephis looked at Kai, paled even more, and finally said in a small voice:

"It's... only the best and most famous idol group of the last decade. Triple Orpheus winners, one hundred consecutive weeks at the top of all charts, six diamond albums. That... that Nightingale. That Night. The lead vocalist..."

Sunny simply stared.

'Wait. Are you telling me...'

Was she so out of it because Kai used to be a member of some stupid boy band in the past?

Changing Star was not horrified, she was... starstruck?

He remained silent for a while.

And then exploded into laughter.

'Gods... oh gods! Nephis is a fangirl! What the Spell, that's too funny...'

Come to think of it, when they first met, she had been wearing headphones the whole time. He should have realized that Neph was into music much earlier. Mighty and stoic Changing Star, brought down by a dainty idol boy...

That was just too hilarious!

He wasn't even jealous. What were the chances of meeting her bias in the damn Dark City? You couldn't come up with that crap!

As he was dying from laughter, both Changing Star and Kai glared at him with difficult expressions. However, Sunny just couldn't stop. His laughter only died down after he began wheezing.

"Sorry, sorry. I just... didn't expect it. From you. Ha! Oh, gods. As for your question, Night has been here for about two and a half years. He lives in the castle..."

Nephis seemed thoughtful for a few moments, then glanced at Kai with wide eyes.

"Two and a half years? But... but I thought that Nightingale was just on hiatus because of Gale's solo project..."

'Oh, there's a Gale, too. I can't even...'

Kai smiled apologetically.

"I'm afraid not. I have indeed spent all this time here, in the Dark City. My agency had to come up with some cover story, I guess. With how things are, they can't even spin things and release a posthumous album, poor guys. You know, since I'm not technically dead, or even Hollow. Just... asleep."

Neph gave him a shy nod.

"Oh. I see."

Trying to remove the awkward atmosphere, Kai offered her another smile.

"By the way, it's so nice to meet another friend of Sunny's. What a surprise! I thought that he was a complete... uh... a solitary person. I'm sorry, but I didn't catch your name. Was it Neph?"

Looking at him, Sunny grinned. Then, he cleared his throat and said in a relaxed tone:

"Oh right, I forgot to introduce you. Sorry, by bad. Night, this is Nephis. Although these days she goes by another name. You might have heard it... meet Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan."

...Now, it was Kai's turn to stare at Neph with horror. The corner of his eye twitched.

However, perhaps due to his idol training, he managed to hide his emotions much faster. Blinking a few times, he lingered for a moment, and then said in his smooth, enchanting voice:

"Oh. It's... a pleasure to meet you, my lady. I have... have heard so much about you. It's an honor!"

Nephis turned away, trying to hide a hint of blush on her cheeks. Staring at the wall of the alley, she hesitated, then awkwardly said:

"So... uh... your friend is already here, Sunny. Can we go have a talk now?"

She glanced at him and added after a bit of hesitation:

"I have something important to discuss with you. It's... a matter of life and death."

Chapter 171: Tether | Shadow Slave

Sunny blinked a couple of times, digesting her words.

A matter of life and death... if Nephis used these words, the situation was indeed dire. She was not someone to throw words to the wind.

However, she was also not to be trusted. No matter how much Sunny wanted for things between them to go to the way they had been before, he knew that it was impossible. There was no way back for either of them.

Sunny knew the true face of Changing Star now. He had seen the endless force of her conviction. In the flaming white inferno of her soul, all things were reduced to ash. Human concepts like loyalty, mercy, and affection had no hope of escaping that annihilation.

No matter what bonds connected them, Sunny could not trust Nephis to put them above her boundless obsession. If push came to shove, she would sacrifice anything... or anyone... to achieve her goal. Including him.

At least that was what he believed.

What's more, despite the fact that she tried to hide it, Sunny could feel that Nephe's demeanor toward him had changed as well. He couldn't tell how exactly, but there was something almost imperceptibly different about how she looked at him.

Once broken, trust was not easy to put back. Perhaps it was simply impossible.

And yet... despite all that, was he really capable of refusing her plea for help?

Sunny sighed and closed his eyes for a moment.

...No. No, he didn't think he was.

Even if things between them became strained, she was still one of the only two people he cared about in this world. The way he felt toward Neph was... was almost like a second Flaw.

No matter how much he wanted to, he just couldn't get rid of it.

Somewhere along the way, it had taken root in his soul. He had hoped that it will wither and die if they were apart, but instead, it just grew stronger. And now there was no escape from it.

Sunny could feel himself being pulled back into the mess of humanity once again. Damn it! This was exactly why he had been reluctant to return here. After suffering so much to leave it all behind, why would he ever want to abandon his peaceful, pleasant, delightful life of solitude?

'Curses!'

But he just couldn't refuse Neph.

...However, that didn't mean that he was going to become her compliant sidekick again.

Even if they were going to work together, they were going to do it on his terms.

'Focus! You came here to purchase Memories to feed for the Stone Saint!'

Changing Star was looking at him expectantly. Sunny tried to appear confident and casual as he said:

"We can have a talk, but not right now. I'll... come find you when I'm done with my business."

Whatever it was that she wanted to discuss, it could not be extremely urgent. After all, Nephis had no idea that he was going to return from the ruins today. If there was no time to waste, she would not be wasting it on him, logically.

Changing Star was silent for a few moments, her face indifferent. Then, finally, she answered in a flat tone:

"That is fine. You know where to go."

Sunny smiled.

"Oh, and if you don't mind, I'll bring Night with me."

Both of them stared at him with the same doubtful expression.

"You will?"

Turning to the charming young man, Sunny pretended to be surprised by his question.

"Don't you want to meet my other friends? They'll be able to answer all your stupid questions, for sure!"

Night hesitated.

"...I guess?"

"Wonderful!"

Sunny gave him a nod and glanced at Nephis, who was clearly wondering if her idol could really be trusted.

"It's decided then. Now, if you'll excuse us..."

Truth be told, he didn't trust the pretty archer that much either. But his ability to detect lies would come in incredibly handy during the conversation with Changing Star.

She was the one and only graduate of Sunny's school of deception and lies, after all.

Pushing Kai away, he waited until they were at an appropriate distance and asked:

"So what did you find out about the Memories?"

Soon enough, they were entering the Bright Castle. Sunny felt strange returning to this splendid, suffocating place. This time, he came as a guest of a well-regarded resident, not as a slum dweller seeking to exchange a soul shard for a moment of respite from the cold, darkness, and terror. The Guards did glance at him with disdain, but remained passive.

Walking under the swinging skulls, they entered the familiar hall of beautiful colored glass windows. The opulent desk that Harper used to sit behind was still there, only now, a similarly downtrodden young woman was scribbling on a piece of parchment instead.

The world didn't care about the death of one little human. It just moved on, instantly replacing that which was lost.

Forgetting it.

Sunny grimaced.

"So, you did find me some Memories to buy? What are the prices?"

Kai smiled, gestured him to follow, and said:

"I did you one better. I actually managed to get us an invitation to the Memory Market."

Sunny frowned:

"A what? Never heard of it."

The charming young man gave him a nod.

"That's not surprising. It's a place where you can peruse various Memories and purchase them for an acceptable price. Uh... I say acceptable, but you know who has all the shards in this place. So, usually, they only let the members of the Host in."

Made sense. Gunlaug would never allow Memories to freely circulate among people who did not belong to him. The Guards and Hunters, though, needed a place to exchange Memories that didn't fit their Aspects for either shards or something that did.

"Then how did you get the invitation?"

Kai shrugged.

"It's not that hard if you have the shards. Problem is, very few of us free folk do."

To Sunny's surprise, they actually entered one of the forbidden areas of the castle. After walking down a few long corridors and going down several flights of stairs, a sturdy wooden door appeared before them.

There was a symbol of a sword and shield drawn on it.

Winking at him, Night opened the door and walked inside.

Sunny followed.

Once he saw the interior of the room, his eyes glistened with excitement.

Chapter 172: Memory Market | Shadow Slave

Behind the door, there was a medium-sized hall that had no windows. It was illuminated by a strange lantern that levitated in its center, radiating a bright and stable glow.

Along the walls of the room stood various weapon racks, wooden mannequins dressed in full suits of armor, and tables with a wide assortment of beautiful and intriguing objects placed upon them.

All of it — the weapons, the armors, the objects, even the levitating lantern — were Memories.

Sunny felt a thundering thought explode in his mind. For a few moments, he was only able to think about one thing:

'Money! That is so much money!'

Inside this unassuming hall hid a fortune that could rival that of an entire corporation.

He was barely stopping himself from drooling.

"Uh... Sunny?"

Brought back from his covetous stupor, Sunny blinked a couple of times and glanced at Kai.

"Huh?"

The beautiful archer hesitated for a moment, then said:

"I was saying, this is Stev. He is in charge of this place."

Only now did Sunny notice that there was someone else in the room. It was a man that was old by the standards of the Dark City, nearing twenty-five or

so. He had a round face and cheerful eyes, which were currently full of doubt and hints of disgust.

His gaze, of course, was aimed at Sunny.

'Have you looked in the mirror, bastard?!'

Apart from his extremely tall stature, there was one other special thing about Stev's appearance, and it was that he was... fat. He was the first obese person that Sunny had met in the Dark City. Having a belly like that in a place like this must have required a lot of work, talent and dedication.

He didn't know whether to be impressed or appalled.

In any case, Sunny decided to not get on Stev's bad side.

...He wouldn't want to get eaten by this ogre, after all!

"Uh... nice to meet you, Stev. I'm Sunny."

The ample giant looked down at him, then glanced at Kai, and said in a strange voice:

"Night, my dear friend. Are you sure this dirty vagrant is... a customer?"

Sunny frowned.

'Be civil... be civil...'

"Hey, fat bastard. Are you sure that this dirty vagrant won't break every bone in that fat blob you have for a body?"

In the dead silence, both Kai and Stev stared at him with wide eyes.

Then, Stev leaned back and let out a thunderous laugh.

"This little gremlin is a funny one, Night! Well, good. Very good! If there's one thing I lack in this cave, it's entertainment."

Chuckling, he shook his head and said:

"Still, my goods aren't cheap, my dear friend... uh... Sunny? A good Memory will cost you a dozen shards, at least. Much more if you want something really useful. Are you sure you have the means to shop here in my emporium? How many shards can a slum rat like you have?"

Sunny blinked.

"I think there was a misunderstanding. Have you seen me? Do I look like someone who would ever be able to buy something from you? Of course not! I've never even absorbed a single soul shard, that should tell you how many of them I have."

Kai gave him a strange look.

Because of how confident Sunny had been while traversing the ruins, he must have assumed that his companion was sufficiently powerful. However, now he suddenly learned that Sunny had never absorbed any soul essence. With his ability to sense lies, the charming archer would know that it was the truth.

Well, of course it was. He absorbed plenty of shadow fragments, instead.

Sunny gave away that misleading secret on purpose. He didn't want Night to start questioning the amount of soul shards he was about to spend. Letting the archer think that he was too obsessed with wealth to expend any on increasing his power would, hopefully, lessen the impact a bit.

Meanwhile, Sunny shook his head.

"No, no. Kai here is the one who'll be handing you the shards. I'm just here to point him at the right ones. I have an eye for good Memories, you see."

By which he meant that his eyes were literally capable of peering into the very essence of Memories and discerning their true traits. But neither of them needed to know that.

Stev scratched the back of his head.

"Uh... well. In that case, take a look around. Ask me any questions if something catches your eye."

Then he glanced at Night and scoffed.

"You could have just asked me for advice, you know? It's not like I can lie to you."

Kai smiled with embarrassment.

"Oh. Ah... yeah, sorry."

When Stev walked away, he leaned to Sunny and whispered:

"So the favor you wanted from me is to pretend to buy a Memory and then give it to you, so that no one knew that you have a hidden ace?"

Sunny stared at him. Actually, it was a good theory. Having a weapon or tool that no one knew about was a very good advantage.

Unfortunately, Kai didn't really know who he was dealing with.

Sunny shook his head.

"No. I don't want you to buy a Memory on my behalf."

Then, with an earnest smile, he added:

"I want you to buy around ten."

Kai's beautiful green eyes widened.

Leaving the charming archer struck dumb and speechless, Sunny walked away and started perusing the various Memories on display.

There were a lot of them. By his estimations, at least a hundred, if not more.

All sorts of weapons immediately attracted his attention.

There were straight swords, curved swords, estocs and rapiers, scimitars and sabres. Various daggers and knives called to him, shining in the bright light on the enchanted lanterns. There were a dozen or so of polearms, from spears to glaives to halberds to naginatas. Several battle axes were displayed nearby. Further away, war hammers, maces, and flails radiated a silent feeling of crushing force. A few bows received a dreamy look from Kai.

There were suits of armor, too. From leather to metal, light to heavy, scale to plate. Elegant, unrefined, graceful, barbarous... whatever a person could wish for. Some of them were shaped like actual armour, others looked like cloth garments.

Placed on tables, various objects begged for his attention. Gods only knew what enchantments they possessed...

Well, to be precise, gods and Stev.

And Sunny.

Walking among the Memories, he would periodically place his hand on them. Immediately, the inner weave of the Memory would be laid bare to his eyes, which were changed forever by the drop of Weaver's ichor.

Studying the logic of the weave, he was able to glimpse its purpose. Of course, there weren't any truly remarkable Memories in the hall. Who would want to sell something like that? However, even then, he managed to separate really good ones from simply acceptable, from borderline awful.

...That last category was what he came here for.

'Quantity over quality, remember?'

Sunny was almost done choosing the absolute worst Memories out of them all when his sight suddenly fell on a badly illuminated corner.

In that corner, covered in a thick layer of dust, stood a seemingly discarded suit of armor.

...When Sunny saw it, his hands slightly trembled.

Chapter 173: Black Armor | Shadow Slave

For a moment, Sunny froze. However, a second later he continued to behave just like before, as if nothing had happened.

The first rule of haggling — never let the enemy see that you're interested in buying something. And Sunny was dead set on haggling until Stev's ears started to bleed today.

Pretending as though he had not noticed the dusty armor, he walked around a bit more, slowly approaching the corner where it was displayed. Judging by the neglect with which the armor was kept, the master of the Memory Market did not know its true value.

Sunny really wanted to keep it that way. Because, if he was right... that armor was much more valuable than anything else here.

He didn't know for sure, but suspected that it was nothing short of a true treasure.

Because he recognized it.

The suit of ancient plate armor was jet black in color, its design intricate and solemn. It radiated a feeling of dark resolve and stalwart, adamantine grace. All parts of it were perfectly fitted to one another, creating an almost seamless barrier of impenetrable steel.

...Or rather, stone.

Because the dusty armor was almost exactly the same as the one the Stone Saint was wearing.

Of course, there were some differences. For starters, this one was somehow more... impressive. It felt as though it had once belonged to a creature of higher status than the steadfast Shadow. While Shadow's armor was made out of dark granite, this one was cut out of pure black onyx. Its glossy surface seemed to absorb and devour any light that fell on it.

And that was just in its dormant state. Once it was animated like that of the Stone Saint... who knew how fearsome it would become?

Why was this treasure gathering dust in a badly lit corner of the Memory Market?

Sunny frowned. Yes, he was most likely the only person in the Dark City who had seen the formidable living statues up close. But still, everything about the onyx armor screamed of how incredible of a Memory it was. What was it doing here, neglected and seemingly forgotten?

He had a lot of questions.

Finally, he managed to reach the armor without showing how interested in it he was. With a false expression of boredom on his face, Sunny raised a hand and absentmindedly put it on the jet black breastplate.

A moment later, his mask of boredom almost cracked. His pupils widened.

What he saw beneath the surface of the armor shocked him to the core. The weave of ethereal diamond strings inside it was... was on a completely another level from anything he had ever seen.

It was much more complex and vast than even that of the Puppeteer's Shroud. Which was not surprising, considering that there were no less than six glowing embers connecting it all together.

And those embers were much larger and brighter than those inside his current Memories.

Sunny gulped.

In front of him, covered in dust, was an Ascended Memory of the sixth tier. Something that only a Fallen Terror could leave behind.

'Jackpot.'

His glee, however, did not last long. Almost instantly, Sunny noticed that there was something wrong with the weave of the onyx armor. It was... damaged.

Thousands of strings were torn apart, leaving the whole pattern broken and full of disharmony. Instead of flowing seamlessly, they floated in the darkness, untethered from each other and the nexuses. The whole thing was a mess.

That's why he couldn't feel any logic or purpose in the weave. It was simply not there anymore.

Sunny frowned.

How could a Memory stay damaged beyond repair? That didn't make any sense. Memories were supposed to repair themselves inside the Soul Sea as long as they were not completely destroyed. This rule was pretty much universal. It couldn't be broken.

Unless...

A seed of understanding appeared in his mind.

However, before Sunny could elaborate on his idea, Stev chuckled and put a giant hand on his shoulder.

"What an awesome armor, right, my dear friend Sunny?"

Saying that, he leaned forward and laughed.

Throughout Sunny's exploration of the Memory Market, Stev had approached him several times to describe the most alluring qualities of his wares or simply to chat. He was obviously bored out of his mind in this windowless hall.

Sunny stared at him and blinked a couple of times.

'If you only knew what kind of a priceless treasure this is, fool!'

"Of all the pieces of crap in this market of yours, this one is by far the most outrageous. I can hardly believe that you had the audacity to show it to people."

By which he meant that it was genuinely the best Memory in this whole room, if not in the whole castle — except for Gunlaug's golden armor, of course.

However, if it sounded as though he was blaming Stev for being shameless and trying to sell people an utter piece of crap... well, he couldn't do anything about that, right?

Stev sighed.

"Usually, I would get into an argument and try to defend my inventory, but I can't really disagree this time. This armor, no matter how awesome it looks, is indeed absolutely useless. It has been here from long before I was put in charge of the market, actually. I even consider it to be a sort of mascot."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"How come no one ever bought it?"

He was pretty sure that he knew, but needed to hear what was Stev's explanation to glean how much the giant man understood.

Stev shrugged.

"Why would anyone buy it? Have you not noticed that it's made of stone? Like, actual stone? It's so heavy that not even Tessai can move under all the weight. Maybe an Awakened would be able to, but to us Sleepers, wearing this armor is pretty much like trying to walk around dressed in a mountain. And that stone is not that hard to break, too."

He looked at the onyx armor and sighed.

"Actually, this armor has quite a story. It once belonged to a member of the legendary cohort that conquered this Castle. Some even say that it belonged

to the first Lord himself. Supposedly, it had an enchantment that made it much lighter back then."

He looked at the armor with doubt.

"But when they were fighting some ancient terror, maybe the Spire Messenger who lived here, the armor was seriously damaged. Something went very wrong, the enchantment was broken, and it turned into a piece of stone. It's so damaged that even the Spell can't make sense of it, simply describing it as unknown that, unknown this... "

Sunny had to force himself to not hold his breath.

The Stone Saint was, supposedly, created by one of the Unknown. It made sense that the armaments of her kind were, too.

Regardless, it didn't matter that much. He was now pretty sure that he knew why the onyx armor was remaining in its dormant form and couldn't repair itself.

It had to do with the difference between the Sleepers and the Awakened.

Once a Sleeper finished his trial by walking through a Gateway, they would take the final step to becoming a true Awakened. Their way of entering the Dream Realm would change, their Aspect would unlock a second Ability, and their core would evolve to the next rank.

There was a quantitative jump in power, but most of the difference came from the qualitative one...

Chapter 174: Shopping Spree | Shadow Slave

Just like Dreamers gained the ability to perceive and interact with Soul Cores, Awakened were able to interact with Soul Essence. By channeling it inside their bodies, they were able to utilize it more efficiently and achieve greater results.

The ability to channel soul essence was also vital to unlocking the full potential of higher rank Memories. Besides the general rarity of such Memories, there was another reason why Legacy clans did not just equip their scions with weapons of tremendous power and let them sail to the Gateway without meeting any resistance.

It was because Sleepers simply had no way to activate powerful enchantments. Even Gunlaug was mostly using his Transcendent armor just for its durability, with a single passive enchantment serving as a nice, but unimportant bonus. In the hand of an Awakened with the ability to channel soul essence into it, the golden armor would have been far more formidable.

Which is where the paradox that rendered the onyx armor unusable came into play.

From his experience dealing with the Stone Saint, Sunny knew that her armor, just like the strange creature itself, had a very special spellweave. It was, in essence, a living armament. Unlike most Memories that could function on their own, it was simply a piece of dead stone when the main enchantment wasn't active.

So, after the onyx armor was damaged, it had to be awoken with soul essence to assume its true form and repair itself. However, there was no human on the Forgotten Shore capable of channeling soul essence, and so it remained broken, which in turn made it useless to all the humans here.

'What a shame... that I'll be able to buy it for a measly sum of soul shards from these fools and feed it to my Shadow, ha!'

Sunny didn't really care whether the armor was intact or not. All he cared about was that it had six Ascended embers that his Stone Saint could devour. Maybe she'll even gain something extra because of her close affinity with the armor... after all, they came from the same source!

For a moment, Sunny considered the idea that his Shadow might refuse to destroy the Memory for the same reason... but then discarded it. She was just a Shadow, after all. His will was her will, right?

Now all that remained was to make the purchase...

Sunny scoffed.

"So it's, uh... just a decoration? How tacky."

Shaking his head, he threw one last glance at the onyx armor, forced himself to turn away, and continued to walk around the Memory Market.

Ten minutes later, he walked over to Kai and silently handed him the rucksack. Then, he named the Memories he wanted him to buy.

The charming young man blinked a couple of times, then said:

"Wait... you weren't joking? You really want to buy t—ten Memories?"

Sunny frowned at him and hissed:

"Keep your voice down! We need people to think that you are the one buying them, remember?"

Kai hesitated, then massaged his temples.

"Sunny, my friend... don't take it the wrong way, but you do know how much Memories cost, right?"

Instead of answering, Sunny gestured to the rucksack.

"Open it, you idiot."

The archer sighed and opened the clasp of the rucksack.

Then, he almost dropped it.

Inside the crude backpack, dozens of soul shards were softly glowing in the dark. There were around seventy of them in there, at least.

Kai's hands trembled. Raising his head, he stared at Sunny with wide eyes and whispered with horror:

"S—Sunny! Where did you get all these shards?!"

Seventy shards was more than most of the people in the Dark City would see in their lifetime. The contents of the unassuming rucksack were enough to start a chain of bloody conflicts that could culminate in a small war.

Sunny stared at him and shrugged.

"What do you mean? They were just gathering dust in my bedroom. I would bring more, but the rest wouldn't fit in the rucksack."

Kai looked as though he was on the verge of fainting. Then, he blushed in embarrassment.

'Ah, I bet he's remembering how he was bragging about being rich and tried to bribe me with a promise of ten whole shards, which, in his words, was a small fortune. Ha!'

While Sunny was silently gloating, a sudden shadow ran over the beautiful archer's face. In a small voice, he said:

"Wait, Sunny. Did you say "bedroom"?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Sure. Why?"

Kai shut his eyes.

"So you actually live in that cathedral?"

There was no point in denying it anymore, really.

"That's right."

Looking at Sunny with a pleading expression, the charming young man asked:

"Then what about the Fallen Devil? Is there really a Fallen Devil in that cathedral?"

Sunny looked at him with confusion.

"That bastard? Yup, he's there. What about him?"

A shaky breath escaped from Kai's mouth. Looking weak and defeated, he shook his head, opened his mouth, then closed it again and simply stared at a wall for some time.

He had the look of a man who suddenly realized that nothing in the world made sense anymore.

When Kai finally regained his ability to speak, his enchanting voice sounded strangely listless.

"I'll... I'll go buy the Memories, I guess."

Sunny offered him a bright smile.

"That'd be great! Thanks!"

Shaking his head, the archer called Stev over and slowly listed the Memories that Sunny told him to buy — including the damaged onyx armor.

With each next one he named, Stev's expression grew weirder and weirder. By the end, he was almost green.

"...Uh. Night, buddy. I really don't want to offend our friend Sunny and your choice of advisers... but you literally chose the ten worst Memories I have in the inventory, by far! If it was anyone else, I would have been ecstatic to get rid of them. But... but... I simply can't do this to you! Please, reconsider!"

Kai glanced at Sunny, asking what to do. It seemed that he didn't want to see his new friend make a terrible mistake.

Sunny smiled.

"Worst, you say? You said it yourself, right? Everyone heard that? I guess you'll give us a big discount then!"

Stev stared at him with a bizarre expression on his face. Then, he said:

"I don't think you understand. When I say worst, what I mean is that they're... trash! Complete trash! You do understand what trash means, right?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Well, you know what they say. One man's trash... is another man's breakfast. Wait, no. Another man's... uh... treasure? Yeah, treasure. That's right..."

Some time later, in an empty corridor of the Bright Castle, Kai took Sunny by the hand. A moment later, several sparks of energy traveled between them.

Sunny tilted his head and listened to the silence. Soon, he heard the faintly familiar voice of the Spell whisper:

[You have received a Memory...]

[You have received a Memory...]

[You have received a Memory...]

After the tenth announcement, everything grew quiet again.

Sunny grinned. Just like that, he had gained ten Memories to feed to his Shadow. He even managed to purchase a tier-six Ascended armor for the laughable sum of seven soul shards.

What a bargain.

'Ah, it's good to be rich!'

However, soon the grin disappeared from his face. Instead, something dark glistened in his eyes.

It was time to have a talk with Nephis.

Chapter 175: Reunion | Shadow Slave

On the way out of the castle, Kai was strangely silent. Sunny didn't mind, because he had a lot to think about.

Going back to that lodge... there were a lot of things there that he had hoped to never see, feel, or experience again. For a moment, he even thought about rushing straight back to his cathedral without making good on his promise.

But why should he? It's not like he asked to be invited back. Nephis was the one who wanted his help with something.

'Just pretend like you don't care. Also, demand to be compensated for whatever it is they want you to do. You're an outsider now, and your services won't be cheap.'

Yeah, that was the best option. He wasn't going to agree to anything that didn't serve his own selfish interests. And there were a lot of things that Changing Star, with her thriving hunting party and following, could provide him with.

There was this one thing in particular, something he really wanted to do, but couldn't on his own. Maybe they would be able to help him with that...

As they were approaching the lodge, Kai suddenly asked in a serious tone:

"Sunny... why did you want me to come with you, really?"

Sunny sighed. Glancing at the charming archer, he hesitated, then said:

"I want you to tell me if I'm being lied to."

Kai frowned.

"I thought that Lady Nephis was your friend. Why are you so wary of her?"

Sunny chuckled.

Was she a friend? Even he didn't know what exactly the two of them were to each other. Worse yet, he wasn't sure what they would become.

"She's the kind of friend you don't really want to lower your guard around."

He lingered for a moment, then added:

"There's also a guy called Caster. He's the one I especially don't trust."

The archer raised his eyebrows.

"I've heard only good things about Caster. Why him specifically?"

Sunny cast a sideways glance at him and scowled. To be honest, Caster hadn't really done anything to deserve his hostility. But there just was something about the proud Legacy that gave Sunny a familiar feeling.

He was too perfect. In Sunny's experience, only people with bad intentions were capable of appearing so flawless. Perhaps he was wrong, but the policy of always assuming the worst had too clean of a track record to be abandoned now.

"He just gives me the creeps."

Seemingly satisfied with this answer, Kai shrugged and followed Sunny into the lodge.

The headquarters of Changing Star's hunting party had changed a lot since his last visit. It had already looked pretty presentable back when he was a member, but now, the lodge was much more impressive.

The first thing that caught the eye was that it had grown much bigger. During the months of his absence, additional structures were built to expand it both horizontally and vertically. Now, it was by far the largest building in the outer settlement, almost starting to resemble a small town hall.

It was heavily fortified, too, especially from the side that faced the white road. A couple of lookouts were visible on the roof, observing the ruins below. They were wearing armor-type Memories and holding bows in their hands.

It was a far cry from how things were before.

Inside, a lot of people were busy with various tasks. Sunny froze for a moment, disoriented by all the activity. He almost felt as though he had somehow mistakenly returned to the castle.

The reason for it was not the neat and tastefully decorated interior, with warm carpets covering the stone floor and various tapestries hanging on the sturdy stone walls. No, the main difference was in how the people here comported themselves.

The rot of hopelessness was almost gone from their eyes, replaced with energy and vigor. Sunny frowned.

'Why hasn't Gunlaug put an end to all this yet?'

From everything that he saw, Nephis was almost asking to be destroyed. How was all of this possible?

His grim thoughts were disrupted by a young woman who greeted them with a smile.

"Welcome! Can I help you with something?"

Sunny stared at the smiling girl, trying to remember if he knew her. No one came to mind. Trying to remove the scowl from his face, he answered in a flat tone:

"Neph is expecting me."

The young woman blinked.

"Uh... sorry. Who is Neph?"

Sunny rolled his eyes.

"Sorry. Lady Nephis is expecting me. You know... Changing Star of the Immortal Flame Clan?"

The young woman's eyes widened.

"Oh! I see. Let me show you the way..."

Sunny wanted to return that he knew the way, but truth be told, he wasn't sure that he did. With all the changes that happened to the lodge, he had no idea where things were.

On their way, they passed the tiny room that used to belong to him. Just as they were walking by, Sunny glanced inside and saw that it was now home to someone else.

In fact, he recognized a couple of things that the new owner left on the narrow cot. They were Caster's. A corner of his mouth curled upward.

'Figures.'

It seemed as though he was thoroughly replaced by the scion of the Han Li clan. Well, whatever. The cot was not very comfortable anyway, unlike his luxurious wide bed in the hidden chamber of the cathedral.

Finally, the young woman led them to the area that used to be the central hall of the old lodge. Now, it was separated from the rest of it by a thick wall, with a sturdy wooden door barring the way inside.

Sunny took a deep breath, then walked in.

He had imagined that moment a lot of times in the past.

...Granted, he never thought that his reunion with the cohort would happen in the presence of an unreasonably attractive, washed-out pop star. But still.

Inside the room, a wide window opened onto an eerily breathtaking view of the Dark City. On the wall beside it, a map of the ruins was littered with

various markings that contained valuable information. They seemed to be much denser than before.

There was a large wooden table beside the window, around which stood seven makeshift chairs. Currently, only two were occupied.

Effie was sitting on one, her feet unceremoniously resting on the table. As always, she looked extremely comfortable and relaxed. On the chair next to her, a beautiful blind girl was cradling a cup in her delicate hands. It was Cassie.

Nephis and Caster stood near the map, discussing something with each other.

The four of them were the core of the Immortal Flame hunting party.

Once Sunny and Kai entered, everyone turned to them.

Sunny put on a brave face and forced out a grin.

"Oh, so many familiar faces. Hi, everyone. No need to say how much you missed me. Anyway, this is Kai. Kai, say hi to everyone — these are Cassie, Caster, and Effie. You already know Nephis."

Giving him a strange look, the charming archer smiled dazzlingly and said in his stupidly beautiful voice:

"Uh... hello. Lady Nephis, Cassie, Caster, huntress Athena... it's very nice to meet you."

Cassie giggled.

"Huh, you won't believe it guys, I thought I just heard Night from Nightingale say my name. Crazy, right?"

Kai blinked.

"Oh, sorry. I am Night from Nightingale, actually."

Effie leaned forward and extended one arm.

Cassie's face, meanwhile, grew deathly pale. An expression of utter terror appeared on it. Her hands trembled, and the cup she was holding fell from them.

Catching the cup just a moment before it hit the floor, Effie sighed and shook her head.

"Every time... this happens every time..."

Sunny furrowed his brow and glanced at the beautiful archer with disdain.

'Oh come on! Was that reaction really necessary?!'

Chapter 176: Coming Clean | Shadow Slave

The four people in the room reacted to his arrival differently.

Nephis seemed to be indifferent, as always. However, Sunny knew her well enough to notice a strange tension hiding in the depths of her calm grey eyes.

Caster greeted him with an amiable smile, but there was coldness hiding behind it. It seemed as though the handsome scion was not happy about this turn of events. Did he see him as a rival for Neph's attention, or was there more to it?

In any case, it was not Sunny's problem. He did not plan on returning to the cohort on a permanent basis. Caster could have all the attention to himself.

Effie looked at him with a genuine surprise.

"Doofus? You are actually alive?"

Sunny blinked and stared at her for a few moments, then said in an acrid tone:

"Sorry to disappoint."

She shook her head.

"No, no. Just... how the hell did you manage to survive three whole months in the ruins?"

He grinned.

"What can I say? I had a good teacher."

Since Effie was the one who taught him how to navigate the Dark City, that compliment was directed at her. However, the huntress simply shook her head.

"No student of mine would be stupid enough to actually live in the ruins. Not to mention returning looking so... feral."

'Do I look feral?'

Sunny took a mental picture of himself. Ragged clothes, dirty hair, a crooked grin, a hint of madness burning in his eyes... no, he couldn't see anything wrong with how he looked. In fact, he thought he looked great.

With an offended frown, he glanced at Effie and said:

"Yeah? Well... you look like you've gained a little weight."

...In all the right places.

'Focus, fool!'

The huntress glared at him for a few moments, then laughed.

"A girl got to eat. But also... wanna die?"

And finally, there was Cassie.

Cassie seemed to have changed the most out of all of them. The changes were not instantly apparent, but to Sunny, who knew her so well, they were unmistakable.

The blind girl seemed more... mature? She looked older, somehow. It was as if there was an invisible weight pressing down on her, the kind that people usually accumulated with the flow of years. Her demeanor was calmer, more restrained. Almost... cold.

"Welcome back, Sunny. I'm so happy that you are alright."

Giving him a polite smile, she grew silent and turned away. This... wasn't exactly the kind of welcome he had expected from her. He had been sure that the blind girl would give him a hug, at least. That was how it always happened in his head.

'Maybe she is shy because of Kai.'

However, Sunny had a feeling that he already knew the true reason for her subdued attitude. He just didn't want to admit it.

It was the vision. That damn vision...

Chasing away the feeling of dread, he sat down on one of the chairs and offered another one to Kai.

"So... what did you guys want to discuss?"

Nephis and Caster exchanged glances. Before saying anything, Caster walked over to the door and closed it. After that, he summoned a Memory that looked like a bone flute and placed it on the table. Immediately, something in the room imperceptibly changed.

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What is that thing?"

The handsome young man sat on a chair next to Changing Star and said:

"This Memory has an enchantment that creates a cone of silence. No one outside this room will be able to hear what we're talking about now."

Ah. This fact alone was already enough to tell Sunny that they were going to discuss something that had to do with the Bright Lord, Gunlaug himself. Suddenly, he felt an irrational desire to be anywhere else but in this brightly lit room. The wide window began to look very alluring.

He sighed.

"So, the Bright Lord is finally ready to obliterate you all? Can't say that I'm surprised. If anything, it's strange that he didn't make a move much earlier."

Effie giggled.

"Oh, did he ever..."

Nephis glanced at her, making the huntress fall silent, and turned to Sunny:

"You are right. The Bright Lord is indeed about to make a move. We have withstood his previous attacks, but they were just a rehearsal. A few provocations to test out strength. Now, he is ready to act in earnest. And that's why I need your help."

Sunny raised his eyebrow:

"How can a cockroach like me help the great and mighty Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan?"

Effie gave him and Nephis a strange look, then cleared her throat.

"Don't take it to heart, princess, but I sort of agree with Sunny. What can this little imp... uh, no offense, Sunny... do that we can't? I mean, he is a decent scout, but..."

"Hey! Offense taken!"

Changing Star smiled, then looked at Sunny.

"Don't be misled by his act, Effie. Sunny might behave like a cowardly weakling, but in fact, he's the last person in the Dark City I would want to face in combat. He is far more dangerous than anyone thinks he is. Isn't it right, Sunny?"

The smile froze on his face. A few moments passed in silence, with everyone staring at him. Finally, Sunny sighed.

"Oh well. I guess the secret is out of the box. Surprise, everybody! I am actually not a weakling. Who could have thought?"

Then, he glared at Effie and added in a mocking tone:

"Oh. My mistake. Actually, everyone except for you already knew. It seems that you are..."

However, Neph interrupted him:

"That's why he was able to survive three months in the ruins, just like he had survived two in the Labyrinth. Sunny is an extremely formidable fighter."

'Wow. Is she trying to flatter me?'

"...He's just a bit of a devious asshole. But that's exactly what makes him so dangerous."

'...I guess not.'

Looking at Effie, Sunny shrugged and smirked.

"If you don't believe her, just ask Night."

Suddenly dragged into the conversation, Kai coughed, hesitated for a moment, and then said:

"Uh... yes, I can confirm. He is indeed a bit of an asshole."

Sunny's face twitched.

"Not that! Tell them how I saved you!"

The charming archer fluttered his eyelashes with an innocent look, then added:

"Oh, right. Indeed, Sunny saved me in the ruins last night. He is a very exceptional and resourceful individual."

Sunny glanced at Effie with triumph. He didn't really want to provoke the tall huntress any further... but she did call him a little imp...

"See, Night has known me for just one night, but even he was able to see how fearsome I am. You and I, on the other hand, had hunted together for an entire month. How come you're so dense?"

Whatever. It's not like he would be spending a lot of time with Effie. Let her boil with anger...

With a teasing smile on his lips, Sunny turned to Nephis and asked:

"Anyway, what exactly do you want me to do?"

Changing Star hesitated, then said:

"I want you to take Effie to your hideout in the ruins and keep her safe there for about a week."

Sunny blinked.

Oh, no.

'...I'm dead.'

Chapter 177: Cloak And Dagger

Sunny grew silent and tried very hard not to look at the huntress, who was glaring at him with murder in her eyes. Did he hear it right?

"Uh... excuse me? Keep her safe?"

Nephis gave him a nod, then hesitated for a few moments and sighed.

"I guess I owe you an explanation."

With a frown, she glanced at the map of the Dark City. Her gaze was fixed on the symbol of a tower drawn in its center with white paint.

The Bright Castle.

After a few moments, she said:

"You asked why Gunlaug hasn't killed us all yet. This is a good question. However, the answer is... complicated."

Changing Star turned her head and looked at Sunny.

"Partially, it is because I have not challenged him openly yet. I also haven't done anything to justify an intervention. Everything we have accomplished for the benefit of the outer settlement not only fell outside the purview of his reign over the castle, but also strengthened the human position on the Forgotten Shore overall. Officially, he has no grounds to accuse me."

Sunny scoffed.

"It's not like Gunlaug really needs justification. He only needs the pretense of one, and even then just barely."

Nephis slightly frowned.

"You are right. If he really wanted to escalate the situation and bring about an open conflict, he could have easily created a reason. Alternatively, he could have sent Harus under the cover of night to make me disappear without a trace. But he didn't. And... we are not entirely sure why."

Sunny blinked.

"You don't know?"

Glancing at Caster, Neph shook her head.

"There are several possible reasons. Perhaps he is uncertain if Harus will be able to dispose of me. Perhaps he is using the growing status of the outer settlement as a deterrent against his lieutenants' ambitions. Perhaps he is just confident and patient. Whatever the case, Gunlaug more or less tolerated our existence for these past four months."

Caster sighed and added:

"Of course, there were still challenges we had to overcome. If we weren't cautious in how we dealt with these provocations, things would have been very different."

Changing Star nodded.

"Indeed. There were several attempts to taunt us into confrontation already. Nothing too bloody, though. However... things seem to have changed. We received word from the castle that Gunlaug is going to act against us soon. This time, he is aiming at one of my companions. The attack will be a serious one, and the target is Effie."

Sunny glanced at the unruly huntress and raised his eyebrows. He had a lot of questions.

"Why her?"

Caster clenched his fists.

"It could have been any of us, really, but Effie... despite all my warnings... got into a rather vulgar argument with a bunch of Guards who came into the outer settlement for some entertainment. Coincidentally, some of these Guards went missing last night. No one knows what happened to them."

'...Oops.'

Sunny was pretty sure that he knew exactly what had happened to them, though. After all, he was the one who killed them.

...But Caster didn't need to know any of this.

"Actually, I might know something about that!" Kai suddenly said, smiling like an idiot.

'Who asked that fool to open his mouth?!'

He tried to make the archer shut up with a murderous stare, but it was already too late. Kai enthusiastically went on to describe how he was kidnapped, put in the well, and then rescued by a mysterious stranger — who turned out to be Sunny.

Luckily, he was under the impression that the kidnappers were all slaughtered by the Black Knight, not realizing that Sunny was the one who had lured them into the cathedral in the first place — after personally killing their leader.

If Kai knew the full truth, things might have turned rather awkward.

After he was done talking, Caster sighed.

"Thank you, this is a very valuable piece of information. Sadly, it doesn't change anything. Effie is still in danger. The Bright Lord is going to use her as a hostage and force Lady Nephis to challenge him. If she does, he will kill her. If she doesn't, Effie will die, and our reputation will be ruined. Either way, he wins."

Sunny cast a sideways glance at Effie, who was still relaxed and seemingly undisturbed by the prospect of dying horribly in the dungeons of the Bright

Castle. In fact, she was currently more interested in fishing out a piece of meat that was stuck between her pearly teeth and not paying Caster any attention.

'What a lunatic.' Sunny thought with scorn, making his shadow shake its head at the irony of that statement.

Turning to Nephis and Caster, he asked:

"How do you know all this?"

In fact, this question was moot. He already had the idea. To receive information about Gunlaug's plans, they had to have a spy in the castle. More than that, given the nature of that information, it had to be someone of considerable rank. Perhaps even someone in the inner circle of the Bright Lord.

Was Neph... working with one of the lieutenants?

Sunny counted the number of chairs in the room. There were seven chairs, but only six people.

'Interesting...'

Caster hesitated, then reluctantly said:

"We have an... ally."

Sunny decided not to press the issue any further. Frankly, he didn't really want to know. There was just one last question he wanted to ask.

"I see. Well, there is this one thing that I don't really understand. You said to keep Effie safe for a week. What is going to change in a week? I doubt that Gunlaug will magically forget everything after a few days."

A heavy silence descended on the room. No one seemed to want to speak first.

After a few moments passed, Nephis finally broke the silence. Looking in the window, she leaned back and said in her usual even, indifferent tone:

"In a week, we will be ready to leave the city."

Sunny almost fell from his chair.

...That was not what he had expected to hear.

Chapter 178: Lost Expedition | Shadow Slave

Soon, another map was spread on the table. This one was drawn on a piece of crude parchment made out of monster hide, and much less detailed than the one hanging on the wall.

Well, that was understandable. Because the second map did not depict the Dark City, but the Forgotten Shore itself. Sunny stared at it in stunned silence.

...Yeah. Nephis had not wasted any time during these three months.

He had no idea how she had gathered all this information, but there was a lot more on the map than he could have ever imagined.

At the center of it, a straight black line depicted the Crimson Spire. The Labyrinth flowed from it, devouring the parchment like an ocean of blood. To the east, a small circle of black ink with a symbol of a white tower inside of it marked the Dark City.

The city was perched on the edge of another, much larger circle. It didn't take too much effort to recognize the cyclopean crater — after all, Sunny had traversed it on a rickety boat once, a lifetime ago. However, only now, looking at it in scale, did he finally realize just how giant the crater was, and how vast the Forgotten Shore itself appeared.

Back on Earth, it would have been as large as a continent.

The Dream Realm was indeed much bigger than their own planet, considering that just one of its numerous regions was this enormous.

There were other symbols on the map that he didn't recognize. However, several of them attracted his attention especially.

On the other side of the crater, almost exactly opposite the Dark City, a symbol of a tree depicted the Ashen Barrow. Some distance to the east of it, on a straight line, there was a mark in the shape of a red cross.

Another red cross was drawn inside the crater just outside the eastern side of the Dark City. The third one was about a week's worth of traveling time to the north, near a symbol that looked like a grotesque, misshapen skull. The fourth one was halfway between the ruins and the Crimson Spire. The fifth one lay to the south, about the same distance as the third, drawn atop the symbol of an arching bridge.

The last red cross was at the very edge of the parchment, far away to the south, beyond the Labyrinth. Near it, two symbols were drawn: one was a crown, and the other one was a question mark.

Sunny quickly realized what these crosses represented.

They were the giant statues of the seven forgotten heroes who had given the terrible oath to vanquish the darkness and created the Starlight Legion.

The one to the east of the Soul Devourer was the statue of the knight that he had used as a shelter on his first night in the Dream Realm. The one near the walls of the city belonged to the woman whose hand had saved them from drowning in the dark sea on the night of their escape.

The other four crosses, most likely, marked four more headless statues.

But where was the seventh?

Frowning, Sunny glanced at the map and said:

"So let me get this straight. You want to leave the Dark City, cross the Labyrinth, reach the edges of the Forgotten Shore... and then return?"

Nephis smiled.

"Pretty much, yes."

He sighed.

"If we somehow survive the months of traveling through the Labyrinth and actually manage to escape it, why the hell would we return?"

The smile on her face withered. Changing Star lingered for a few moments, then pointed to the three symbols at the lower edge of the map: the red cross, the question mark, and the crown.

"The first lord of the castle led an expedition to find the way out of the Forgotten Shore. This is where their trace disappeared. From what we were able to learn, an unassailable mountain chain blocks the path to the south. They ventured into the mountains... and never returned. Nothing but death awaits us there."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"So you aren't really looking for a way out... you're looking for the remains of the cohort of Sleepers that had conquered the castle fifteen years ago?"

Neph nodded.

"There is an item that they took away from the castle. If we find it... we'll have a chance in the fight against Gunlaug."

Sunny frowned. He felt as though she was not telling him everything. Maybe what little trust remained between them was not enough to share those secrets. Maybe she didn't want someone else in the room to hear them...

But then again, he didn't really care. Changing Star's business was her own. Sunny was just here as a potential mercenary. As long as the reward was worth it, he was ready to not ask any questions.

Provided that not knowing the answers was not going to get him killed, of course.

Feeling his hesitation, Nephis added:

"The way to the mountains is not as dangerous as you think. There is... a method we can use to reach them comparatively safely. But once we're there... that's where we'll need your talents. Having you with us will make a lot of things easier."

Sunny looked at her with doubt:

"How do you know all this? It's not like there's anyone in the Dark City who was alive back then."

Nephis shrugged.

"There isn't, but there are stories. Some written evidence. However, most of this we have learned from Cassie's visions."

She gave the blind girl a warm look.

"Cassie has helped us a lot."

Sunny had to think. If Changing Star made this plan, it meant that she had good reasons to believe that it was doable. Of course, there would be danger. Nothing on the Forgotten Shore was ever safe or easy. But there was a rare opportunity in all of this, too.

He felt very tempted to leave the ruins for a few months in the company of an extremely formidable cohort. Outside the walls of the Dark City, Nightmare Creatures were generally of a lower rank than those inside. The efficiency of his hunting would be much higher, which would land him more shadow fragments and Memories to feed to the Stone Saint.

Especially if powerhouses like Nephis, Effie, and Caster were fighting alongside him. But more importantly, if Cassie was there to warn them of the dangers that they had no business trying to fight.

He never forgot how many times her affinity to mysteries and revelations had saved their lives in the past. Like on that awful night when they had summoned a terrifying mimic from the depths of the dark sea.

With a true seer accompanying them, the most harrowing thing about the Labyrinth — the cursed black waters — were not as unknowable and thus deadly anymore.

So he was not immediately against the idea, more so because he would be additionally compensated for the efforts.

But... there was something else that he had to consider.

Looking up, Sunny glanced at the people gathered in the room and cleared his throat.

"Uh... I would like to talk to Nephis alone. Please."

Most of them just stared at him without moving. Caster, especially, did not seem happy about the prospect.

'What is it about him and Neph? Why is he so... possessive?'

But after Changing Star gave them a look, they reluctantly stood up and left the room one after another.

Soon, Sunny and Nephis were left alone.

He hesitated for a long time before finally speaking. His voice was raw and hoarse:

"Neph... why are you doing this? Why are you trying to pull me back? Don't you know how this all will end?"

She watched him silently for a while with an inexorable expression. Then, she simply said:

"Because there's only two people I trust in this world, Sunny. One is Cassie. The other one is you. I only trust you to have my back."

He couldn't help but laugh bitterly.

"Have your back? Neph, you know what awaits the two of us in the future. This story won't have a happy ending. There'll be only... only sorrow, pain, and rage. Remember?"

Changing Star lingered for a few moments. Her face was calm and firm. When the silence became almost overwhelming, she finally answered:

"Life is not a story, Sunny. It only ends when you die."

He smiled crookedly, not knowing how to answer.

"So? Will you help me?"

Sunny sighed and stood up, glancing at the map of the Forgotten Shore one last time.

"I... don't know. I need some time to think. I'll take Effie and keep her safe for a week. You'll have the answer once we meet again."

She nodded, accepting that condition.

Turning around, Sunny forced himself to appear nonchalant and left.

As soon as the door closed behind him, his expression changed.

'Damn! I forgot to discuss my compensation!'

It would look really silly if he went back now... right?

Right?

The shadow palmed its face, once again lamenting the stupidity of its master.

Chapter 179: New Generation | Shadow Slave

Once outside, Sunny spent some time finding Effie and Kai. The two of them were in the dining area of the lodge, discussing something between themselves.

There was no sign of Cassie anywhere, but he did notice Caster observing him from the stairs leading to the second floor.

'Is she avoiding me?'

Somewhat disappointed, Sunny landed on a chair next to the two locals he had come to know and gave them a dark look.

"What, the two of you know each other?"

Kai smiled.

"Who doesn't know huntress Athena? We had, uh... a few brushes in the past."

Deciding not to inquire what type of brushes he was talking about, Sunny sighed and asked:

"Does she know about that peculiar Flaw of yours?"

The charming young man blinked a couple of times, then said with confusion:

"I guess so? I don't make a secret out of it."

Great. Of all the people in the world, he got stuck with two weirdos who had no qualms about telling every random stranger about their most hidden vulnerability.

...Well, if he had a Flaw like Kai's, he wouldn't worry about it too much either.

'Lucky bastard.'

Since there was no point in pretending anymore, Sunny simply asked:

"Well? Was anyone in that room lying?"

Effie grinned.

"Ah, so that's why you dragged Night along. Paranoid much?"

Sunny would love nothing more than to ignore that question, but unfortunately, his own Flaw was much more restrictive than Kai's.

"Not at all. In fact, I think that I'm exactly as paranoid as a person should be. By which I mean extremely, of course."

Saying that, he looked at the charming archer with expectation. Kai hesitated for a few moments.

"No, no one said a single lie. Your friends are all extremely honest people, Sunny."

'Oh, you poor lamb...'

Not knowing how to react to that display of naivete, Sunny shook his head and lowered his voice:

"Not even Caster?"

Kai gave him a nod.

"No, he was honest, too."

Was Sunny wrong? Was Caster really just an honest and honorable guy?
Was his distrust irrational?

Somewhat unsure, Sunny lingered for a bit and then turned to Effie.

"Neph and I agreed to continue our conversation in a week. Until then, you'll be under my protection."

The huntress giggled.

"Wow. That makes me feel real safe. Thanks, shorty"

He grimaced.

"Don't you worry. I might not look like much, but wait till you see my roommate..."

Kai suddenly choked on his drink and paled a little. Reminded of something, Sunny patted him on the back and said:

"Anyway, thanks for your help. Our deal is done. See you around, I guess."

He was not going to miss this guy one bit. Sunny wasn't winning any prizes with his looks already, but next to Kai, he seemed downright ug... uh... barely above average.

The charming archer looked at him for a few moments, then forced out a smile:

"Yeah, it was nice to make your acquaintance, Sunny. I can honestly say that spending time with you is... uh... an unforgettable experience."

With that, he glanced at Effie with something that resembled pity, rose, and left.

The two of them were left alone.

The huntress looked around with a weary expression, and then asked in a neutral tone:

"So? When do we leave?"

Sunny didn't hesitate.

"Right now. Honestly, I can wait to get back to the ruins. This place... it gives me the creeps."

Effie gave him a strange look, then shrugged.

"Sure, no problem. Let's ditch this scary place and go hide in the ancient cursed ruins. At least we can feel safe there, right?"

Some time later, they were carefully walking through the streets of the Dark City. Being here in daylight was not something Sunny was accustomed to, so he was justifiably tense.

Luckily, both of them were experienced hunters and worked well together. Sunny fell into the familiar rhythm of cooperating with Effie without skipping a bit, as though three whole months had not passed since they last saw each other. It was honestly nothing short of jolly.

At some point, the unruly huntress glanced at him and asked:

"But seriously. How did you survive, Sunny?"

He gave her a dark look, then shrugged.

"How do you think? You know that I am very good at hiding in the shadows. I slept during the day and hunted during the night. Observed my prey carefully before striking at their weak spots. If I ever met something I wasn't sure I could kill, I ran."

She became thoughtful for a while, then said:

"It's noticeable, you know. You've changed. You look... feel like a true hunter now."

Sunny grinned.

"Well, I would hope so. I hunted more Nightmare Creatures than was reasonable, really."

She smirked.

"How many?"

That was a good question. Sunny hesitated before answering:

"Around sixty? Yeah, no more than that, I think."

Together with those terrors he had slain in the Labyrinth, his kill count had long ago moved past a hundred.

Effie blinked and looked at him with a dark expression. That many hunts in only three months... the number was nothing short of staggering.

Actually, it was completely insane. Out in the real world, it was widely known that Awakened Nightmare Creatures were too tough for mere Sleepers to fight. Anyone who managed to prevail in a battle against one would earn themselves a proper reputation. Killing a dozen would make a person famous.

If Sunny were to return home and claim that he had slaughtered a hundred, most of them in a cursed ruin populated by Fallen abominations, the news of his accomplishment would fly around the whole planet in an instant. He would be hailed as an unparalleled genius and a hope of the entire generation.

...And yet, there were dozens of people just like him in the Dark City, many of them even more accomplished. Much more. Effie had several hundred hunts under her belt. There were a couple more hunters in the outer settlement whose track record was just as impressive... even if with the death of Jubei, their numbers had shrunk.

Inside the Bright Castle, there was Gunlaug himself, his five lieutenants, all the Pathfinders of the Host, more than a few experienced Hunters, and even a handful of Guards with a lot of battle scars to prove their prowess. All of them were at a level that Sleepers simply weren't supposed to ever achieve.

The Forgotten Shore was truly an... interesting place.

If Nephis were to somehow succeed and bring even just several of them back to the real world, how would the world change? Would other things that had been considered impossible before suddenly have their status put under scrutiny?

Was it the reason why the Spell gave her the name Changing Star? Was Neph destined to not only create change, but also be the catalyst of it?

Consumed with these thoughts, Sunny walked through the cursed ruins. Soon, a familiar shape of the cathedral appeared before his eyes.

Looking at it, Sunny shuddered.

He had been honest when he told Effie about how he managed to survive all this time.

However, he had failed to mention how close he came to dying in the process.

The memory of his first visit to the cathedral, and its consequences, was something he really liked to avoid...

Chapter 180: Break Point | Shadow Slave

It happened a few weeks after he left the castle behind. Back then, Sunny was just starting to feel confident in the absolute darkness of the cursed night. He stalked the ruins, searching for prey and slaying one monster after another.

Looking back, those few victories might have gone to his head a little. Or maybe he was just too sane to survive alone in the Dark City.

It was the first meeting with the Black Knight that caused him to lose that state of mind.

Sunny did not become interested in the ruined cathedral by accident, nor was he led there by empty curiosity. In fact, he had noticed something strange about the ancient temple and decided to explore it after careful consideration.

Because the thing he saw was too alluring to ignore.

At dawn, for a few short minutes, he could see a weak, ethereal golden glow emanating from the dark cathedral. The same golden glow he had seen twice before.

Once deep within the ruby droplets of his own blood after consuming the Drop of Ichor, and another time exuding from Changing Star's unconscious body after her battle with the horror of the depths.

Without having to guess, Sunny knew what this golden shine was.

It was the light of divinity.

With his own eyes altered by the drop of divine blood, which was left on the talons of the Vile Thieving Bird after it had stolen Weaver's eye, Sunny was somehow able to perceive it.

Considering that both Nephis and he possessed some measure of divine affinity, it wasn't hard to come to this conclusion. More than that, the circumstances surrounding the awakening of his ability to see the golden glow supported it.

Thus, hoping to find another treasure equal to the Drop of Ichor, Sunny entered the ruined cathedral. Then he froze for a second, awed by its grandeur.

That second was all it took for the Black Knight to skewer him on his sword.

Sunny didn't know how the massive devil managed to avoid being seen by his shadow, nor how he got so close without making any noise. All he knew was that a menacing black giant suddenly stepped forward from the darkness that enveloped the temple and pierced him with a wrathful gaze.

There were two scarlet flames burning in the impenetrable emptiness behind the visor of the knight's helmet. Looking at them, Sunny felt as though he was staring into the eyes of death itself.

However, even though Sunny was caught by surprise, his body moved on its own. Countless hours of practice did not go to waste.

In the end, it were the reflexes that Sunny had engraved into his muscles and bones that saved his life, even if only by a hair's breadth. Because of his quick reaction, the massive greatsword of the evil creature did not cut him in two.

Instead, it simply disemboweled him.

Feeling a blinding pain pierce his abdomen, Sunny staggered and looked down, only to see a river of blood flowing from his stomach, which was cut wide open. The red ropes of his intestines were clearly visible in the terrible wound, already on their way to falling out.

The horror of seeing something that should have been inside of him moving to the outside was much more powerful than the excruciating pain of his

flesh being torn apart.

Pressing one hand against the wound, Sunny fell on his back and weakly tried to crawl away. However, the Black Knight was already moving, rising his greatsword to deliver a finishing blow.

For a fraction of a second, everything froze. Sunny didn't have time to come up with an elaborate plan, nor even think things through. All he knew was that he had to buy himself a chance to crawl away... somehow.

Of all the Memories at his disposal, nothing seemed to be of use. Not the austere and razor-sharp Midnight Shard, not the ominous and powerful Puppeteer's Shroud. His mighty tier-five armor did not even slow the black blade for a moment.

Even augmented by the shadow, they were not a match for the terrifying devil of the ruined cathedral.

...In the end, Sunny simply thrust his hand forward and let a small and ordinary-looking rock fly from it into the depths of the ancient temple. His shadow wrapped itself around the little stone, enhancing its enchantments.

In the next moment, the rock suddenly howled, replicating the scream of the last Nightmare Creature that Sunny had killed. Augmented by the shadow, the howl shook the walls of the cathedral, causing dust to fly into the air.

The Black Knight stopped, then looked over his shoulder in the direction where the howl was coming from. He seemed to hesitate for a moment.

Not wasting any time, Sunny pressed tight onto his terrible wound, rose to his feet and staggered away, almost slipping in the puddle of his own blood. Groaning from pain, he tried to reach the exit of the old temple.

Miraculously, he did. The Black Knight stopped in the doorway, simply following the small figure of the mortally wounded human with the burning flames that served him as eyes.

Then, it indifferently turned away and slowly returned into the darkness.

Some time later, Sunny found himself lying in a ditch somewhere in the depths of the Dark City. He had found his way to this ditch and crawled into it, hoping to hide himself from the monsters stalking the ruins at night.

He was consumed by pain, fear, and disbelief.

Was this... was this how it was all going to end?

Was this how he was going to die?

He wanted to cry for help, but knew that no one would come.

He wanted to simply cry, but, for some reason, nothing but laughter escaped from his lips.

Funny... it was just too damn funny!

An outskirt rat like him, dying in a ditch.

What a fitting end.

Why wouldn't he laugh?!

It was all just so hilarious.

A laughing fit sent him into an ocean of suffering. Every time he moved, it felt as though invisible blades were cutting into his abdomen, slicing his flesh apart.

And yet, he couldn't stop laughing.

The funniest thing of all was that he couldn't even die.

No matter how much he bled, his tenacious blood refused to give up. Guided by Blood Weave, it desperately tried to repair the damage done to his body. However, the damage was just too extensive. Even augmented by the shadow, the Blood Weave couldn't contend with it.

In the end, he was locked in an endless cycle of excruciating agony, not quite alive, but also unable to die... yet. Minute after minute, hour after hour, nothing but pain and suffering drowned his consciousness, until something inside simply cracked.

Who wouldn't have gone mad?

Through the fog that clouded his mind, Sunny hazily realized that the sun had come up, then disappeared again. This happened a few times until he finally let out a quiet sigh.

Enough was enough. He couldn't take it anymore.

It was time to give up.

He had a good run, really.

But how could anyone endure all this?

He wanted to die.

He was ready... ready...

'Are you? Are you really ready?'

Sunny thought for a bit... and then suddenly bared his teeth.

Fuck no.

He was not ready.

Give up?

Never! Never! He was never going to give up!

He refused to give the world the satisfaction of devouring him. Not unless it choked to death on his soul.

'No, I'm not going to die... I'm going to live... I'm going to thrive... I'll be the last one standing, no matter what...'

With that thought, he summoned the Midnight Shard and gripped its hilt with the last bit of strength left in his body.

Memory Enchantments: [Unbroken].

Enchantment Description: [This blade refuses to be broken, and thus is durable beyond reason. It will greatly enhance the power of its wielder when they are close to death, however only if the wielder is still unwilling to surrender.]

Responding to his vicious promise, the ancient blade finally opened the gate to the well of power hiding somewhere deep within his soul. Instantly, a torrent of energy filled his body with dark resolve.

The power given to Sunny by the Midnight Shard enhanced the healing factor of Blood Weave, allowing it to just barely keep him from slipping over the edge of death while it slowly began to repair his ravaged body. And as long as he was almost dead, the effect of Unbroken continued to feed Blood Weave with power, creating another cycle.

A virtuous cycle. A cycle of unbroken will to survive.

This was how Sunny was able to live through his first encounter with the Black Knight.

However, while his body eventually healed, the wound dealt to his mind remained. Days later, after Sunny finally crawled from that ditch, he was never quite the same.

And he never forgot the debt he owed to the Black Knight.

One day, he was going to kill the bastard, no matter the cost.

...And now, approaching the cathedral months later in the company of Effie, Sunny felt like that day was drawing closer.

Perhaps he really should agree to participate in Neph's expedition.

As long as she helps him repay that debt.

There was a lot to think about.

Effie's voice tore him away from these thoughts.

"Huh... Sunny? Are you alright?"

He shook off the harrowing memories, hesitated for a bit, and then smiled.

"Of course! Never been better. Here we are, by the way. Welcome to my humble palace."

The huntress looked at the grandiose cathedral with doubt.

"Here? You live here?"

Sunny remembered his First Nightmare and shrugged.

"What can I say? I have a weak spot for ancient temples..."

Chapter 181: Rules Of Hospitality

Effie regarded the cathedral for some time, then glanced at Sunny with doubt.

"I know for a fact that nothing comes out alive from that temple. Are you sure that this is where you live?"

With a carefree smile, Sunny shrugged. The fact that Effie knew about the danger hiding inside the ruined church did not surprise him. Even if it was situated outside of her usual hunting grounds, she had extensive knowledge of the Dark City, some from her own exploration, some from sharing information with other hunters.

Dead tired and longing to return to the peaceful silence of his home, he didn't waste any time and told her about the Black Knight who guarded the cathedral.

The unruly huntress scratched the back of her head.

"So... there's a Fallen Devil inside? He's the roommate you were talking about?"

Sunny gave her a nod.

"The bastard endlessly patrols the ground floor and kills anything that comes through the doors. However, if we enter through the roof and stay hidden, we can reach my living quarters without any problem. More than that, nothing will bother us once we're there, because the bastard never comes that way and obliterates anything that tries."

Effie was silent for a while, then grinned.

"So, you basically have a devil for a butler. Pretty smart..."

Sunny chuckled.

'Was that a compliment?'

"...for a doofus like you."

'Ah, there it is.'

Once they climbed up to the roof, there was a slight problem. Sunny failed to consider that the hole in the tiles that he used to enter the cathedral, while wide enough for his small frame, would be too tight for the tall and robust huntress to crawl through. Looking at the narrow gap between the massive plates of dark marble, Effie gave him a gloomy look.

However, before Sunny could come up with an alternative plan, she simply bent down, grabbed one of the incredibly heavy plates, and moved it aside. The words died on his lips.

'S—strong. So strong. I wonder who is stronger, she or the Stone Saint.'

Honestly, he wasn't sure.

Before proceeding further, Sunny instructed Effie on how they were going to get her inside the hidden chamber and watched as the huntress reluctantly dismissed her bronze armor. With only a short white tunic covering her lovely olive skin and abundant figure, she looked very... uh... comely. For a moment, his displeasure of having someone intrude upon the secluded peacefulness of his lair evaporated.

...But only for a moment.

"Don't you get any strange ideas. Your armor is just too much of a risk. We can't allow ourselves to make any noise, that's all."

Effie grinned.

"Strange ideas? Why are you talking about having strange ideas all of a sudden, huh Sunny?"

He gritted his teeth, turned away to hide his blushing face, and crawled into the hole between tiles.

'Damn woman!'

Once they landed on the support beam of the cathedral, Sunny guided Effie's hands to rest on his shoulders. Although the sun was still high in the sky, there wasn't any sunlight around them. Only the floor of the ancient temple beneath them was bathed in it.

But even then, large areas of the grand hall were drowned in deep shadow.

Only it wasn't really shadow. It was darkness. Not one born from the absence of light, but true darkness, one which even his sight could not pierce. Sunny didn't know if it was summoned here by the Black Knight or simply obeyed him, but this was how the bastard had managed to sneak up on him unnoticed back when they first met.

In any case, he had to guide Effie across the beams of the cathedral. One wrong step, and they would plunge to their deaths.

'What a bother.'

Feeling rather awkward because of how close their bodies were to each other, Sunny quietly sighed and took a step forward. It was hard to concentrate...

'Strange ideas... who's having strange ideas? Not me!'

A few minutes later, they reached the hidden balcony behind the statue of the unknown goddess. Despite the fact that nothing out of the ordinary had happened, Sunny was rather on edge.

Something told him that this was going to be a really long week.

Once they entered his hidden chamber, Sunny informed Effie that she was free to create light and speak. Not wasting any time, the unruly huntress summoned a radiant Memory and looked around with curiosity.

The beautiful and spacious room that had once belonged to the priestess of this ancient temple was suddenly flooded with soft light. The intricate engravings on the walls created an atmosphere of sanctity and elegance.

Here and there stood various pieces of furniture, most made out of opulent pale wood, with a few mismatched pieces that Sunny had scavenged from the ruins.

Effie whistled.

"Have to give it to you, Sunny. You sure know how to live in style. Who would have thought?"

He smiled.

"Jealous?"

She sighed.

"The important thing is that even if Gunlaug tracks us here, none of his people would be able to enter. So we're indeed safe."

Slightly disappointed, Sunny shrugged.

"Well, make yourself at home. I'll show you the back exit and other stuff later."

With that, he furtively glanced around and tried to quickly hide a few things from sight to make his home more presentable. If he had known that there was going to be a guest here, he would have cleaned up the mess a little in advance.

Not that Effie paid it much attention. She walked around with curiosity, studying the engravings on the walls and ancient furniture.

...But then, suddenly, Sunny heard a loud giggle coming from behind.

Turning around, he saw Effie standing in front of the wardrobe hidden behind a stone panel. The wardrobe was currently open, showcasing the garments left behind by the priestess.

The huntress looked at him with a strange smile.

'Why... why is she staring at me?'

"What?"

Effie shook her head.

"No, nothing. It's just... you know, Sunny, when I first saw you, I thought — look at this tiny boy! He's just like a toy! You just want to dress him up like a doll and play with him..."

Sunny blinked a couple of times, then scowled angrily.

"Who are you calling tiny? I'm not tiny... in any way, you beanpole!"

Not paying him any attention, the huntress glanced at the wardrobe and giggled again.

Then, suppressing laughter, she said:

"Who knew that you are into... playing another kind of dress-up, huh?"

It took Sunny a couple of seconds to realize what she was implying. When he did, he turned bright red from outrage.

The nerve! The gall! How dare she!

"What are you talking about?! Those aren't mine! The priestess who lived here before left them behind!"

Effie nodded a couple of times.

"Sure, sure. You just happened to have a wardrobe full of pretty dresses. By accident..."

"That's the truth! I never lie!"

She looked at him with a wide smile.

"But of course! It must be the truth. I totally believe you. Definitely."

Sunny stared at her with his mouth wide open, not knowing what to say.

Effie, meanwhile, looked around and innocently fluttered her eyelashes.

"But, Sunny... we have another problem."

Gritting his teeth in irritation, he snapped:

"What is it?!"

She lingered for a few moments, then said teasingly:

"There's only one bed. Ah, what a predicament! Whatever should we do?"

Sunny glared at her for a long time, then spat:

"You take the damn bed! I'll sleep on the floor!"

With that, he turned away and tried to take a deep breath.

'Why did I ever agree to this?! Women... damn women... they're the true terror!'

...Indeed, this was going to be a very long week.

Chapter 182: Dinner Time | Shadow Slave

After Sunny calmed down a little and had time to think about it, he realized that things weren't as bad as he had thought.

Yes, living this close to the rambunctious huntress was a very special kind of trial, especially due to how much joy she seemed to derive from tormenting him, but there was one redeeming aspect to all of this... aside from the fact that he would get to constantly feast his eyes on... wait... back to the topic!

It was that Sunny was a nocturnal creature. He didn't have to sleep on the cold floor or interact with the vigorous huntress that much, because he would be asleep during the day and out hunting during the night. The window of time when they would both be awake and stuck in the hidden chamber together was not that large.

More than that, Effie had brought enough food to satiate her unnatural hunger in that bottomless bag of hers, so he didn't even have to feed her. So hosting her was not going to be as bothersome as he had initially assumed.

After showing the huntress around and enduring several more good-natured jabs, he finally had some time to himself.

Finally!

Sitting down in a remote corner of the chamber, he closed his eyes and dove into the Soul Sea.

As always, the tranquil sea met him with calming darkness and peaceful silence. Not paying any attention to motionless shadows that stood at the edge of the visible part of it... not even to gaunt and pitiful Harper... he walked over and stood beneath the black sun of his Shadow Core.

Then, Sunny summoned the Stone Saint.

"Hey there, darling. Guess what? I brought dinner..."

Before commanding the Memories he had purchased with the help of Kai down, he quickly glanced at the runes surrounding the taciturn monster:

Shadow: Stone Saint.

Shadow Rank: Awakened.

Shadow Class: Monster.

Shadow Attributes: [Battle Master], [Stalwart], [Spark of Divinity].

Shadow Fragments: [6/200].

Only six fragments, and she was already so strong. He couldn't wait to see his monster grow even more ferocious.

Not wasting any more time, Sunny summoned the first Memory — a strange sword with a stupid amount of useless gems embedded into its blade, for some idiotic reason — and handed it to the Shadow. She took the sword without showing any emotion and ruthlessly shattered it with her gauntlets.

[Your Memory has been destroyed.]

Sunny made a face.

"Why thank you, Spell! I wouldn't have guessed if it weren't for you. So helpful."

Two torrents of ethereal sparks entered Stone Saint's body and were absorbed by the dark embers burning in the depths of the living shadow that hid in her body.

[Stone Saint has grown stronger.]

Was it just him or did the Spell sound a bit hurt?

'Well, tough. I didn't hear you complaining when Neph was promising to rip you to shreds.'

He grinned and glanced at the runes again.

Shadow Fragments: [7/200].

Satisfied, Sunny summoned the next Memory. The process repeated itself.

[...Stone Saint has grown stronger.]

[...Stone Saint has grown stronger.]

[...Stone Saint has grown stronger.]

As the number of shadow fragments saturating the core remnants inside his pet monster grew, his mood continued improving. This was the best feeling ever!

Shadow Fragments: [8/200]

Shadow Fragments: [10/200]

Shadow Fragments: [11/200]

Finally, after the ninth Memory was consumed, the runes describing the number changed to twenty out of two hundred. The Stone Saint looked considerably stronger already. Remembering the changes that happened to his own body after his first few kills, Sunny could more or less gauge how much her condition has improved.

The increment wasn't really that substantial... but in battle, the tiniest advantage could often decide everything. Especially considering that it was going to be doubled by the augmenting effect of his indispensable, but impudent shadow.

All of this was just a prelude, anyway. The main event was yet to come.

Full of anticipation, Sunny called the onyx armor down. If his calculations were correct, this relic alone should give the Stone Saint twelve shadow fragments — almost as much as the nine lesser Memories Combined.

The jet black suit of ancient plate armor appeared in the air in front of him. Surrounded by the lightless vastness of the silent sea, the feeling of dark grace it emanated was even more pronounced. Sunny clicked his tongue.

'Ah, what a beauty.'

It was almost a shame to destroy it.

...Almost.

Slightly reluctant to part with the ancient armor yet, Sunny read the runes describing it.

Stev was right. Even the Spell couldn't make sense of the damaged Memory.

Memory: [M... Un...old].

Memory Rank: ?

Memory Tier: ?

Memory Type: unknown.

Memory Description: [...Pr... ...first ...army ...shed ...own...]

Memory Enchantments: —

Many of the runes were missing, and those that did appear refused to coalesce into any sort of comprehensible words. However, Sunny did notice a few of the strange runes that made his head hurt, the same ones present whenever the Spell mentioned the mysterious Unknown.

'Just as I thought.'

The armor was clearly connected to the same tribe of Nightmare Creatures that the Stone Saint had belonged to before becoming a Shadow. The origin of the strange living statues was tied to the Unknown, so it was logical to assume that the onyx armor had something to do with them too.

Well, no matter. He knew that this Memory was severely damaged when he bought it. Sunny was never planning on using it, anyway, only feeding it to the Saint.

"Time for dessert!"

With a wide smile, he pushed the beautiful black armor to the stone monster.

However, the smile soon froze on his face.

Because the Stone Saint did not move to take and shatter the armor like she did with all the other Memories. Instead, she simply turned her head and looked at it. The hue of the crimson flames burning in her ruby eyes ever so slightly changed.

It was almost as though they were filled with the tiniest shadow of... sorrow.

"Come on! Eat it!"

But no matter how much he tried to get the Stone Saint to destroy the armor, she refused. The living statue just stood there and did nothing.

After a while, disappointed, Sunny stared at the onyx armor and sighed.

Well... serves him right. To be honest, he had a slight inkling that this would happen.

Nevertheless, Sunny had decided to buy the armor anyway. It's not every day that you stumble upon a tier-six Fallen Memory, even if it's damaged beyond your ability to repair.

Perhaps he would don it one day... if Nephis would actually manage to open the path to the Gateway and he would somehow find himself among those lucky few to reach it alive and become Awakened.

Until then, the awesome black armor was pretty much useless.

With a deep frown, he left the Soul Sea and summoned it into existence. Soon, the armor appeared on the floor of the hidden chamber.

Effie looked at it with interest:

"Wow. What is this?"

Sunny lingered for a long time, and then finally answered:

"A decoration... I guess."

The huntress raised her eyebrows.

"Really? Well, what are you staring at me for?"

He gritted his teeth.

A few awkward moments later, Sunny said:

"Uh, can you help me move it? It's... too heavy for me to lift..."

Chapter 183: Learning New Tricks

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

With a rather unpleasant noise, the monster's head fell down. Sunny indifferently bent his arm and wiped the Midnight Shard on the sleeve of his armor, watching as the massive body slowly topple over.

Standing on the other side of it, the Stone Saint simply flourished her sword in and stopped it abruptly mid-swing, sending every drop of blood flying to the ground. Then, she just stood there absolutely still, pretending to be a statue.

Sunny sighed.

'That's a cool trick. I should learn it.'

Honestly, cleaning his blade on the Puppeteer's Shroud was not very fair to the tier-five armor. He felt guilty.

"Watch my back."

With the taciturn Shadow observing the surroundings, he summoned the Prowling Thorn and used it to recover the soul shards from the carcass.

This was the fourth Nightmare Creature Sunny had killed this night. With the help of the Stone Saint, his hunts became much easier than before. Not even mentioning the fact that the Shadow was as powerful as most of his marks, the mere fact that he had a partner to draw the enemy's attention away changed a lot of things.

Sunny was somewhat capable of, but preferred to avoid engaging in direct battle with these abominations. His way of doing things was to strike from the shadows and, ideally, kill the enemy with a single strike. If everything went smoothly, the prey would never even see its killer.

Of course, such a hunting method required a lot of cunning, patience, and preparation. He had to observe the enemy for a long time to learn its behavior and weaknesses. The confrontation itself took just a few seconds, but only because days had been spent in advance to make that immediate resolution possible.

After hunting in that meticulous way for three months, Sunny felt strange simply overpowering the monsters with brute force. The combination of Stone Saint's indomitable defense and his swift blade was nothing short of miraculous.

It was almost like fighting side by side with Neph.

Almost...

With a sigh, Sunny threw the soul shards into his rucksack and stood up.

He was facing a problem that he had never expected to face. It was honestly rather bizarre.

He was running out of monsters to kill.

Awakened Nightmare Creatures weren't that abundant in the Dark City to begin with, let alone those whom he had already tracked, studied, and felt confident attacking. After tonight's massacre, pretty much every one of them was dead.

Sunny had cleaned the house.

But he was so much stronger now, so much more dangerous. With the help of the Stone Saint, maybe there was no need to be so cautious...

'No. This is how you get yourself killed.'

This was a dangerous mindset. Despite his recent growth, Sunny was still in no way the apex predator in the ruins. In fact, he was the opposite of that. Of all the creatures stalking these streets, he was the weakest.

'Pride is the gravest of all sins. Next thing you know, you'll be trying to hunt the Fallen Ones.'

Sunny would perhaps survive a confrontation with a Fallen Beast... maybe... but actually defeating one was a whole other conversation. And if he had the misfortune to stumble on something of a higher class, his chances of making it out alive would not be very high.

He could start investigating one of the Awakened creatures that he knew of. Or simply go home.

However, something was bothering Sunny. There was this feeling in his head that he had a seed of an idea, but then got distracted and failed to fully form it.

'What was I thinking about just now?'

Whether or not to hunt again tonight... how powerful he had become with the help of the Shadow... how it was not very practical to wipe the blood with the sleeve of the Puppeteer's Shroud...

'Oh, right!'

Back when he saw the Stone Saint shake off the blood of her sword, he had thought that this would be a cool trick to learn. And at that moment, he got a feeling that he was onto something.

'I should learn it... I should learn it...'

Suddenly, Sunny's eyes became bright.

If he could learn this trick from the Stone Sait... what else would he be able to learn from her? This Shadow of his had an Attribute called [Battle Master], which apparently meant that she was proficient in all forms of combat.

Was there a better teacher for someone like him?

The answer was — no. With his technique stagnating because of the lack of guidance, there was no one better than the masterful Stone Saint to learn from.

Suddenly excited, Sunny summoned the taciturn monster back into his shadow and headed home.

By the time he returned to his hidden lair, Effie was already awake. Sitting on the bed, she was lazily staring at the ceiling and whistling a cheerful tune. Her long legs were somewhat covered by the blanket, but still... that white chiton of hers was way too revealing! Sunny had to be very careful to look the other way.

It was very hard...

"Oh, you're back. Good hunt?"

Instead of answering, Sunny walked over to his chest, glanced at the huntress with suspicion, and opened it.

Then, he poured the contents of his rucksack inside. Seven soul shards fell on the pile, which was sadly visibly diminished because of his recent expenses.

It was still nothing to scoff at, though.

Effie whistled.

"Seven? How many heads is that?"

Sunny closed the chest and sat on it.

"Four. Three monsters and one beast."

Effie blinked, a bit stunned.

"Three monsters? How did you manage to kill three monsters in one night?"

He hesitated, then sighed.

Trying to hide the existence of the Stone Saint would be very bothersome, especially if he was going to venture on an expedition with Neph's cohort. Out there in the Labyrinth, chances were that none of them would be able to hold back to hide their aces.

That was if he was even going to agree to it, of course.

Anyway, there would be not much harm in revealing her now. Or rather, the benefits outweighed it.

"I'll show you. Just don't freak out."

Effie giggled.

"I'm pretty sure that nothing you're capable of showing can freak me out..."

Ignoring her teasing tone, Sunny glared at the huntress and summoned the Saint out of his Soul Sea.

Immediately, two crimson flames ignited in the depths of his shadow. A moment later, the menacing stone knight stepped from it on the floor of the hidden chamber and turned her head to Effie.

Effie recoiled.

"What... what the hell is that?!"

Chapter 184: Value Of Humility

The mighty huntress stared at the Stone Saint, her hand hovering in the air, ready to grasp the shaft of the spear. Her beautiful hazel eyes were full of tension and dark anticipation.

The contrast between that fierce pose and the fact that she was still comfortably wrapped in a blanket was so funny that Sunny couldn't help but snicker.

"Gee, relax. Haven't you seen an Echo before?"

Effie blinked.

"That thing... is yours? Wait, you got an Echo?!"

He gave her a nod and gestured at the Stone Saint.

"Yes, I did. Meet Saint. Aint' she a beauty?"

The huntress stared at the taciturn creature, then scowled with outrage.

"You lucky bastard! You do know that I haven't even caught a sniff of an Echo after three years in this pit? How dare you get one before me, huh?"

Sunny laughed.

"Actually, this was my second Echo. The first one got killed in the Labyrinth."

Effie glared at him for a long time, then shook her head with an expression of utter dejection. Finally, she turned to the Shadow and studied her.

"Wait... is she what I think she is?"

Sunny nodded.

"Yeah."

The huntress stood up from the bed and, leaving the blanket behind, walked barefoot around the Stone Saint. She studied her from all angles and then said:

"How the hell did you manage to kill one of those things and survive?"

Sunny, who had found himself involuntary studying Effie from all angles as well, blinked a couple of times and shrugged.

"Actually, they got wiped out by a group of Fallen. It was an epic clash, to say the least. I just happened to be there in time to finish one off. And here we are."

Effie stared at the Shadow with admiration.

"What class is she?"

Sunny smiled.

"Awakened monster. But I watched her kill two Fallen Beasts, so... I'd say she's an elite among her peers. Anyway, you can see how it's not impossible to hunt three monsters in one night with her by my side. I studied them in advance, of course. That's why we were so fast in dealing with them."

The huntress crossed her arms, thought for a bit, then gave Sunny a strange look.

"Why are you showing her to me? With how paranoid you are, I'd expect you to keep such a treasure hidden."

He stood up, lingered for a moment, then said:

"With what I have planned, showing her to you is sort of a requirement."

Effie grew silent, then gave him a mischievous smile.

"Ah. Sorry to disappoint. Don't get me wrong, I'm up for all kinds of fun. But, Sunny... Nightmare Creatures is where I draw the line."

He frowned, not quite getting what she was talking about. Then, his eyes widened.

"What?! You... what kind of a degenerate are you?! Training! I wanted to use her for training!"

The unruly huntress blinked innocently.

"Training? Sunny, there's nothing wrong with being a bit inexperienced, at your age. In fact, it's quite charming! You don't need to resort to this kind of thing, you know..."

"Inexperienced?! Who are you calling inexperienced?! I'm plenty experienced! Wait... crap. What are we even talking about?!"

Dying from laughter, Effie left Sunny to fume with outrage and walked over to the makeshift kitchen while shaking her head. Soon, the tantalizing smell of roasting meat filled the air.

'...I'm going to kill her. Should I kill her? It's going to be pure self-defense, anyway. A week of this will be the death of me.'

With a sigh, he tried very hard to calm down. When his thoughts returned to their usual cadence, Sunny stood in front of the Stone Saint and slowly exhaled.

It was time to learn.

On his way back to the cathedral, Sunny had made a hard decision.

He decided not to augment his body with the power of the shadow during his practice with the Stone Saint.

Even though he knew that this was going to bring him a lot of pain in the future, he was adamant about his choice. There were several reasons why he wanted to face his pet monster with his own physical ability and nothing else.

The first and most simple reason was that Sunny knew that the shadow would not always be there when he needed it. Just like during the battle against the Spire Messenger, when it had been away scouting, circumstances in which he was going to have to rely on nothing but his own prowess were bound to happen.

Not to mention that it had been his own reflexes, and not the shadow, that saved him from being cut in halves by the Black Knight.

The second reason was less evident. It had to do with the existing hierarchy of power in the Dark City. At the very top, there were the Fallen. Beneath them, those creatures that were merely Awakened. And at the very bottom, Sleepers.

Any fight that a human could face in that cursed place was going to be against an overwhelming force. With time, Sunny had adjusted to this reality and was able, these days, to face the lower classes of the Awakened abominations on almost equal terms... with the help of the shadow. He was still weaker, but not by that much.

However, deep down he knew that, sooner or later, he would be forced to fight against Fallen enemies. And he was also almost sure that he would have to cross swords with humans that had saturated their cores to the brim with soul essence, and were thus much stronger than him.

For that reason, his experience hunting monsters who were not much stronger than his augmented self was actually an impediment. It dulled his edge and made him forget what it actually meant to struggle against an enemy who was leagues above him — the knowledge and mindset that he desperately needed to retain to have a chance of surviving the future.

He had to keep himself humble.

And lastly, there was one truth that he had learned during these six months on the Forgotten Shore, and it was that nothing was more beneficial to one's growth than fighting against a superior opponent — especially if that fight ended in your loss. One defeat taught a person more than a dozen victories against weaker enemies would.

The problem was that, in this cursed place, any defeat meant death. So Sunny actually had little experience losing to someone. From start to finish, he tasted loss only three times: once in a battle against the carapace centurion, once when he had faced Nephis under the branches of the Soul Tree, and once in this very cathedral, when the Black Knight's sword had sliced his stomach open.

Each of those defeats taught him more than anything else did.

...So, having the opportunity to fight with a monster who was much more powerful than him, and yet had no desire to kill him, was an extremely rare and precious opportunity.

That's why Sunny steeled himself and let the shadow rest on the floor while he faced the Stone Saint.

Taking a deep breath, he summoned the Midnight Shard, assumed a defensive stance, and looked the menacing stone knight right in the eyes.

"Attack me."

Not wasting even a second, she did just as she was told.

'Oh... crap!'

Chapter 185: Battle Master | Shadow Slave

The Shadow attacked with the vicious strength of a true monster. Knowing perfectly well that his strength was not enough to block her sword, Sunny desperately moved the Midnight Shard to deflect the strike to the side.

The countless hours of practice and hundreds of thousands of times he had repeated his katas had not been in vain: his body moved with lightning speed, placing the blade in the path of the Stone Saint's weapon at just the right angle. Feeling the impact reverberate in his bones, Sunny gasped from the pain and stood his ground.

Guided by the Midnight Shard, the Shadow's sword glided to the side and missed his body by a wide margin. However, before Sunny had time to congratulate himself, the Saint simply continued moving forward and slammed into him.

Being hit by her shield felt like crashing into a stone wall at high speed.

Flying back, Sunny impacted against an actual wall and rolled to the floor. A small yelp escaped from his lips.

Getting distracted from her food for a moment, Effie glanced at him and called:

"Sunny? You're alive?"

He weakly raised a hand and brought his thumb and index finger together in the shape of a circle.

"...Yeah."

The huntress smiled.

"Good! Don't die yet, alright? It's going to be really inconvenient for me to get out of here without your help."

Sunny gritted his teeth.

'...Is that all you care about?'

"I'll try."

Slowly rising to his feet, he staggered and had to lean on the wall for balance.

The Stone Saint returned to her spot and stood there indifferently, not paying any attention to his furious glare.

With a heavy sigh, Sunny walked back to stand in front of her, raised the Midnight Shard, and spat:

"Again."

Over the course of the next few days, Sunny often wondered if he had really gone mad. Otherwise, why would he willingly subject himself to this torture? Pa nda

No vel His life now consisted of only three things: spending time with Effie, practicing with the Stone Saint, and exploring the cursed ruins.

Out of the three, the time he was spending in the deadly maze of the Dark City was by far the least dreadful. He even found himself enjoying it a great deal.

Once you begin thinking about a cursed ancient ruin teeming with abominable creatures as a comforting place, you should really start thinking about your life choices...

And yet, Sunny knew that he was on the right track.

Painful as they were, his training sessions with the menacing Shadow had turned out to be even more advantageous than he imagined. Every bruise, every cut, every drop of blood that he spilled was making him stronger.

After a long period of stagnation, his technique was finally improving again. And it was doing so with noticable speed.

The best thing about it was that he had not even scratched the surface of the immense didactic potential of the [Battle Master] Attribute. For someone like him, who had never received a formal education in combat, it was simply a boon.

It was a hidden treasure.

Back when he had observed the Shadow in the fight against a carapace centurion, he had noted her distinct battle style.

The taciturn creature fought with the firmness of stone, combining flawless defense with devastating offense. Each action was efficient and perfectly calculated, with blocks, dodges and deflections leading into deadly ripostes. It was solid, indomitable, and inevitable.

However, this was not the only battle style that the Stone Saint was perfectly proficient in. Rather, it was something that she used based on her current weapons and opponents. Back when her original fought against two harrowing Fallen Beasts, her style was reckless and brutal, disregarding any form of defense in favor of an endless onslaught of vicious attacks.

Although there were some foundational similarities between them, these two techniques were vastly different. It seemed as though she was able to switch between countless styles to suit the situation.

Sunny couldn't wish for a better sparring partner.

His own style — or rather, the kernel of one that had been given him by Nephis — was flowing and unpredictable. It focused on adaptability and making it impossible for the enemy to anticipate your next move. The more Sunny fought against the Stone Saint, the more he realized how extraordinary it actually was.

However, it didn't mean that this style couldn't be improved. In fact, Sunny suspected that it was actually designed with the intention of being able to

incorporate various elements from other sources. If so, it was a perfect foundational style to learn.

All of this made him wonder where this strange style had come from, and if Changing Star had taught him its basics for a reason.

In any case, he was determined to make sense of it, improve his mastery of the things he had already learned, and begin to incorporate elements of Stone Saint's stark technique into his own.

However, this was easier said than done.

At first, fighting against the menacing Shadow appeared to be almost impossible. Every time he gave her the command to attack, he would inevitably end up on the floor in mere moments, groaning and consumed with pain. His whole body was bruised black and hurting terribly. If not for the tenacious enhancement of the Blood Weave, Sunny did not know if he would have been able to continue.

Or at least continue at an acceptable rate. With its help, however, the speed of his recovery was considerably faster. It was almost inhuman. Because of that, he was able to train more intensely and for longer periods of time.

Just as he had expected, every defeat taught him something new. Losing to a superior opponent was the best way to improve, indeed. Back in the real world, many people were foolishly obsessed with their pride and lived for nothing but to achieve victories against others.

Not Sunny, though. He was perfectly content with losing time after time, as long as he continued to become stronger with each loss. The only person he wanted to defeat was the version of himself from the last fight, over and over again.

Just like that, he had slowly begun to put up at least some resistance to the Stone Saint. At first, he was happy with being able to deflect one attack. Then, two. Then, several.

Before too long, he stopped counting the number of attacks and started counting the number of seconds he remained on his feet. It was just a couple at first, then four or five, then a dozen. Finally, he was able to fight with the menacing stone knight for vast amounts of time, sometimes even up to a minute.

Even Effie seemed to be impressed. She usually paid little attention to his training, but after some time, Sunny noticed her glancing in his direction more and more. At first, he thought that the unruly huntress simply enjoyed watching him suffer in his suffering, but then he realized that she was actually trying to learn from his mistakes, too.

Sunny didn't mind.

His movements slowly became more confident, purposeful, and precise. His body, while damaged and bruised, was brimming with strength and agility.

He was maturing.

It was then, when his spars with the Shadow turned less one-sided, that Sunny noticed something strange.

And when he did, everything changed.

Chapter 186: Eureka | Shadow Slave

It took Sunny a long time to perceive the anomaly for several reasons. To begin with, it was so subtle that it was almost impossible to notice. His whole mind was concentrated on the thoughts of battle technique and styles, and still, he only saw it by accident.

The second reason had to do with his decision to face the Stone Saint without the augmentation of his Aspect Ability. Because of it, the shadow had nothing to do. It returned to acting as a proper shadow and obediently repeated his every movement while he fought.

The last reason was Effie — or, more specifically, the fact that she had brought a source of light into the hidden lair, making the shadow actually visible.

Because of this unlikely combination of events, Sunny was able to see it.

He was in the middle of a fierce battle against the Stone Saint, sweat and blood trickling down his battered body. The clamor of swords clashing against each other permeated the chamber, drowning the raspy sound of his laborious breathing. Deflecting another blow, Sunny swiftly crouched and let the edge of the creature's shield whistle through the air above his head.

His rather clumsy attempt to imitate one of the Stone Saint's explosive ripostes was easily blocked, and the two of them continued the duel. This time, it lasted for an especially long time. Sunny was pretty sure that he had already withstood the oppressive assault of the monster for one and a half minutes.

If true, this was his personal best.

After countless spars like this, he would sometimes enter a special state of flow. In it, his mind was calm and clear, operating at a tremendous speed. When Sunny entered this state, his attention became simultaneously sharp like a blade and strangely unfocused.

Normally, he would have to concentrate on specific details, like watching the enemy's footwork to predict where the next blow would come from. Sunny was even able to split his mind in two, with one part of it absorbing the information that came through his eyes, while the other was preoccupied with what the shadow saw.

In this way, he could either concentrate on two enemies at the same time or have a full view of his surroundings, so that no one could sneak up on him from behind.

However, with his attention not focused on anything, he was somehow capable of perceiving everything. Every detail, be it the enemy's footwork, the direction of their gaze, or the slight change in the environment simply became a part of the all-encompassing tapestry that he perceived as a whole.

Needless to say, this ability to see everything simultaneously and think with sufficient speed to act on it dramatically boosted his combat performance. It was consonant with and felt like a natural continuation of the strange sense of clarity that he had achieved after almost dying in the battle against his first carapace centurion.

...Right then, Sunny entered this state of flow once again. After a few more exchanges, he suddenly noticed that there was something strange about his shadow.

Instinctively, he paid it more attention while continuing to fight.

It was then that he realized that his shadow's movements, while almost exactly like his, were actually not the same.

There was a very slight, almost imperceptible difference. Pa nda

No vel But he could feel something vast and profound hiding in this tiny divergence.

Stunned, he slowed down and stared at the shadow.

'What... what did I just see?'

Sunny was so stunned, in fact, that for a moment he completely forgot where he was. In the next second, the rim of the Stone Saint's shield hit him in the chest, sending him flying at the wall once again.

Sunny crashed into the cold stones, fell to the floor, and weakly groaned.

'Ouch. That one hurt.'

However, he immediately forgot about the pain. Sitting up, Sunny stared at his shadow with wide eyes.

'This... this is...'

What did he see?

The shadow's movements, while exactly like his own, were also different. It was... it was...

As though a light ignited in his head... or rather, became drowned in shadows... Sunny suddenly had an epiphany. This revelation was so astonishing that he almost cried out loud.

The divergence between him and his shadow was not random, nor was it chaotic. It was consistent and harmonious, hinting at a deeper meaning. And that meaning was...

That his shadow had a battle style of its own.

Sunny only saw a glimpse of it through the slight discrepancy in their movements. If someone didn't know the shadow as well as he did, they would never notice anything. Even he only saw it by accident.

What he saw wasn't enough to discern anything about that battle style except for the fact that it existed. He was also able to sense its... essence. It was flowing and insidious, shapeless and everchanging, like the shadow itself.

This description was so close to its nature that Sunny felt it was safe to assume that the movements of the battle style were not something the shadow performed on purpose, but rather a manifestation of its innate quality.

Did... did his shadow have a battle art fused into its very being?

"...It is an invaluable helper," he whispered.

If this was true, then Sunny had just found the answer to the question that had been tormenting him for the last few days.

While the battle style entrusted to him by Nephis was versatile and deadly, and the technique of the Stone Saint was indomitable and oppressive, they were not his own. No matter how much he practiced them, he felt that there was something missing.

Individuality.

Only by creating a style of his own would Sunny be able to become equal to the best fighters out there. Until then, he would always be just an imitator.

Of course, creating a true battle style was not something that a novice like him was capable of doing. More than that, there was a difference between knowing that the mysterious shadow style existed and actually understanding what it was.

But still, still... it was a beginning. If he learned the secret hiding inside his shadow and combined it with the flowing adaptability of his current style, what would the result be?

Standing up, Sunny spat a mouthful of blood, wiped the sweat off his brow and walked over to his tormentor, the Stone Saint.

Raising the Midnight Shard, he gritted his teeth and said:

"Again!"

Soon, the clangor of swords resounded in the hidden chamber once more.

Only this time, Sunny paid close attention to his shadow...

Chapter 187: Trial Of Strength

Trying to learn the secrets of the shadow was a very slow process. Sunny could only see glimpses of the mysterious battle style while fighting against the Stone Saint, and doing so usually required his full attention. As long as he wasn't fully concentrated on his opponent, their clashes ended in mere seconds, making so that there was nothing to observe.

But when he concentrated on the battle at hand, he couldn't really pay any attention to the shadow, which in turn eliminated the possibility of observing it. Finding the right balance between the two tasks was not easy, not to mention painful. Every time he failed, a new bruise appeared on his body.

And yet, there was progress. Although Sunny was still unable to peer into the depths of the battle art, he was slowly beginning to get a feel for it. His shadow was more treacherous, fluid, and malleable than he was. There was a hint of a graceful cadence to its movements that lacked in his.

It was as though it was performing a dance. A shadow dance.

Frustrated by the lack of a breakthrough, Sunny wanted to push himself harder, but had to stop himself. Even considering the tenacious effects of the Blood Weave, his training regimen had already brought his body to its limits. He needed to preserve its condition if he was going to join Nephis on her long expedition...

Unless he wanted to enter the Labyrinth while crippled with exhaustion and injuries, of course.

What Sunny failed to realize due to the lack of experience — and the fact that he had been mostly self-taught — was that this accomplishment had already made him an outlier as far as humans went. Most novices weren't even able to master the superficial aspects of different battle styles, let alone recognize their fundamental traits for what they were.

They simply followed the rules without understanding them, regarding styles as something indubitable and rigid. Only the most experienced fighters had enough understanding of the essence of a battle art to attempt to manipulate it.

So he was already far ahead of the curve.

But since Sunny never had a proper mentor, he had no idea that he was trying to accomplish something that an average human would never be able to do. His only point of reference was Nephis, who was an absolute outlier herself.

If renowned masters of combat arts were to learn that a self-taught youth from the outskirts had managed to dismantle two incredibly complex battle styles into basic elements and assemble them together to better suit his tastes, while also trying to learn a third one from his shadow, they would be stunned.

However, Sunny just thought that he was unsuccessful and incredibly slow.

'Ugh! Maybe I'm just stupid...'

Picking himself up from the floor, Sunny sighed and wiped the sweat off his forehead. Then, he glanced at the Stone Saint and leaned on the wall.

"You're done for today?"

Effie was nearby, dying from boredom. Watching Sunny torture himself was her only way to entertain herself in this dark room.

Well, that and torturing him herself. Among other things.

'Whatever.'

He gave her a tired nod.

"Yeah, I think so. It's already dusk, so I'll probably rest for a bit and go out."

The huntress narrowed her eyes.

"By the way, I wanted to ask. How do you even know what time of day it is? There's no windows here, and we can't hear the sea yet."

He glanced at her with a gloomy expression and reluctantly answered:

"The shadow of the Crimson Spire. I can feel it."

Effie blinked a couple of times, then shrugged. Pa nda

Novel "Ah, I see. Anyway, since you're done... can I have a turn with your girlfriend?"

Sunny gritted his teeth and answered without even thinking:

"She's not my girlfriend!"

Only then did he realize what Effie was asking. She had never shown interest in sparring with the Stone Saint before. Why now?

Not that it mattered.

"And no, you can't."

The huntress tilted her head.

"What? Why?"

Sunny scoffed.

"Do I need to explain it? It's too dangerous! What if something happens to you?"

Effie giggled.

"So let me get this straight. You can train with her all day every day, but you think that, for me, she's too tough?"

He shook his head.

"Don't misunderstand. It's just that if something happens to me, the worst outcome is that I die. If something happens to you, however, I'm going to get killed by Nephis. The end result is the same, but one way is vastly better than the other. Get it?"

She crossed her arms.

"Oh, come on! I just want to see which one of us is stronger!"

Sunny scowled.

"No way. Don't even think about it."

Effie silently glared at him.

"I said no, okay? There's no way I'm letting you fight her!"

The huntress grinned.

"Ah, alright. That's not going to be a problem..."

A few minutes later, Sunny was staring at the scene in front of him in disbelief.

How did it come to this?

Leaning over the opulent wooden table stood Effie and the Stone Saint. The elbows of their right hands rested on the table, while their palms were pressed against each other.

The Shadow was taciturn and indifferent, while the huntress was full of enthusiasm.

They were... preparing to arm wrestle.

Effie glanced at him and grinned.

"Wanna bet who's going to win? If I overpower your girlfriend, you'll owe me a shard... no, ten shards!"

Sunny sighed.

"What if you lose?"

The unruly huntress winked at him.

"...You know what, I don't even want to know. I don't gamble, so forget about it."

Effie sighed.

"So boring. Anyway... let's do this!"

She gripped the Stone Saint's hand and prepared to wrestle.

"Let's go!"

Instantly, both the Shadow and huntress tried to bring the opponent's arm down. The table groaned, subjected to a crushing amount of pressure. For a moment, it seemed that the Stone Saint was on the losing side, but in the end, her hand only moved by a millimeter.

The monster stared at the young woman with her ruby eyes, her face hidden behind the visor of the helmet. There was no emotion in her gaze.

Effie's hazel eyes, on the contrary, were full of mirth. There was a relaxed smile frozen on her face.

However, Sunny could see that she was putting her all into this struggle. The lean muscles tautened under the olive skin of her back. Her whole body was like a loaded spring, brimming with strength and overwhelming power.

And yet, the Shadow's hand did not move.

It seemed as though neither of them could overpower the other.

'Huh. I wonder who will give up first...'

A second after second passed in silence, but nothing changed. Both Effie and the Stone Saint were persisting, not giving up even a tiny bit of ground. The amount of strength they were exerting to keep this volatile balance made Sunny sweat a little.

'They're both monsters!'

...In the end, the first one to give up was the table. Not able to withstand the pressure anymore, it simply... exploded.

Covering his face to protect it from the flying splinters, Sunny froze for a moment, then stared at the pile of tiny debris.

A feeling of deep sorrow and indignation pierced his heart.

'Oh... oh no! My table!'

Chapter 188: Of Heaven And Hell

Just like that, a week had passed. Miraculously, Sunny had survived.

Even more miraculously, he had somehow managed not to kill Effie... which was a big accomplishment in and of itself. In fact, by the end of it, their forced cohabitation had turned rather pleasant.

They were both solitary hunters, after all. There was an instinctive understanding between the two of them.

His overall combat skill and particularly comprehension of both his own battle style and that of the Stone Saint had improved by leaps and bounds. He felt faster, stronger, and better prepared to face the horrors of the Dream Realm.

Although he had yet to reach the same level of physical power that he had possessed before sacrificing a hundred shadow fragments to create the Shadow Saint, Sunny felt that the current him was far deadlier of an opponent.

Which was good, considering how fast the grim future was approaching.

...Currently, Sunny and Effie were sitting on the support beam of the main hall of the cathedral, looking down from the head-spinning height. Far below and away from them, the Black Knight walked through the patches of light and darkness, continuing his neverending patrol.

Effie scowled, then whispered:

"So this is the bastard?"

Sunny gave her a gloomy nod.

"Yeah. In the flesh... or whatever he has instead of it."

The unruly huntress gave him a long look.

"How the hell did you manage to live through a fight with that fiend?"

He grimaced.

"Barely. Also, calling it a fight is giving me too much credit. I just got myself gutted and crawled outside. He never leaves the cathedral, so I got away."

She shivered.

"Are you sure that he won't hear us?"

Sunny pointed down.

"As long as he doesn't walk past that column, and as long as we're not too loud and keep our voice down, we're safe. Trust me. I've been studying that bastard for two whole months."

Effie suddenly grinned.

"So... how loud are we talking about? Because I can promise to..."

Sunny rolled his eyes.

"Can you stop? We're in a temple, for gods' sake."

He didn't need to hear the end of the phrase to know that it was going to be highly suggestive and very inappropriate.

She quietly giggled.

"Fine, fine."

After a couple of minutes passed in silence, Sunny looked down and saw that the pale light of dawn was slowly turning brighter. It was almost time for the two of them to leave the cathedral.

He had yet to come to the final decision regarding Neph's request. Depending on his choice, he and Effie would, perhaps, never see each other

again.

Sunny quietly sighed.

Then, turning to the huntress, he said:

"Hey, Effie. Can I ask you something?"

She looked at him with a silent question in her eyes and shrugged.

"Sure. Go ahead, doofus."

Sunny hesitated, feeling the somber mood of the situation. Then, looking away, he said:

"Tell me honestly... were you dropped on your head a lot when you were a kid?"

Effie blinked a couple of times, then suddenly pressed both hands against her mouth to suppress a laugh. In the process, she almost fell down from the support beam.

"Heavens, Sunny... do you want me to laugh out loud and get us both killed? What's up with that question? No, I was not."

He looked at her with a dubious expression.

"Then why are you so damn cheerful all the time? It's not normal. You're like a crazy person... and I know a thing or two about that, mind you!"

The huntress smiled.

"Ah. That."

Then, she shrugged.

"It's simple, really."

Sunny waited for the explanation, noticing an unfamiliar air of melancholy around the vigorous young woman. Her usual infectious vitality somehow felt... lessened. Panda

Novel "It's because I don't think that this place is as bad as all of you seemed to believe. Everyone in this dark city is convinced that this is hell."

She hesitated.

"But to me, it's a paradise."

Sunny glanced at her and frowned.

"How so?"

Effie sighed.

"You wouldn't understand. But for some of us, the real world was more of a hell than the Dream Realm."

Sunny turned away, thinking about his one life in the outskirts. The reason he was able to adapt so well to the ruthless terror of the Nightmare Spell was because, at its core, it wasn't that different from his own reality.

"Still. What kind of a paradise is this?"

A sad smile appeared on the young woman's face.

"The only kind we deserve, I guess."

Then, she looked at Sunny and asked:

"Say, Sunny. You're from the outskirts, right? So you didn't receive a lot of education, I bet?"

He shook his head.

She chuckled.

"Well, not like it would have changed anything. The schools are basically propaganda camps, anyway. They teach kids some useful stuff, but also turn them unable to ask questions and blind to the truth."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"The truth?"

Effie gave him a nod.

"The truth that our world is dying. Well, not the world, really. Just the part of the ecosystem that we need to survive."

Something moved in his memory. A year or so before Sunny was born, a whole continent was lost because a Category-Five Gate had opened on its coast...

But the huntress quickly overturned his expectations:

"And I'm not talking about the Nightmare Spell. I'm talking about what we, humans, have done to our planet without anyone's help. There were more than ten billion people on Earth a couple of hundred years ago, did you know? But now, there's barely three. And half of them only have food and shelter because of us Awakened and the powers we possess. Which were given to us by the Spell."

She wasn't wrong. Sunny remembered the poisonous, acrid air of the outskirts. The inhuman conditions in the underground factory where his mother had worked. The towering barriers protecting the city from the deadly winds of the wasteland outside. He knew, of course, that the planet was not in a good shape, compared to the past.

But he never really thought about it that much. To him, this was simply how life always worked.

Effie shrugged.

"Who knows how many of us would still be alive without the Spell? I honestly don't know. But if you ask me... I think that one day in the future,

more people will believe that this Realm is a paradise. Just like me."

On that ominous note, she stood up and stretched her whole body, making Sunny hurriedly look away.

'Damn... pure thoughts, Sunny!'

"Anyway, it's already morning. Time to meet up with Princess and the others. Let's go..."

Soon, they were standing in front of the cathedral. The morning sun was slowly crawling through the sky, washing the ancient city in its pale light. Sunny and Effie did not have to wait long before Nephis and her companions appeared from the ruins.

Sunny blinked.

There was Changing Star herself, Caster, Cassie... and Kai.

What the hell was he doing here?

Once the four Sleepers approached and greeted them, Sunny immediately stared at the beautiful young man.

"Night... uh... why are you here, buddy?"

The archer smiled.

"Ah! I'm very happy to see you too, Sunny, my friend. Lady Nephis has asked me to join her on this expedition, and after careful consideration, I have decided to agree."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"Alright, I know that I'm crazy, but when did you lose your mind too?"

Kai looked at him with a strange expression.

"Wait.. crazy? What do you mean, you're crazy?"

Sunny sighed.

"Nevermind."

Then, he turned to Neph.

"About your request. I'm ready to join the expedition, but on one condition. I will not become a part of your cohort. Rather, you can provide sufficient compensation to acquire my services."

Nephis looked at him for a while, an inexorable expression on her face. Then, she said in an even tone:

"Do you have something in mind?"

Sunny grinned.

"As a matter of fact, I do. Behind us, you can see a magnificent ancient cathedral. Inside that cathedral lives a creature which is called the Black Knight. He's a Fallen Devil. In return for my help during the expedition, I want your help after it is concluded. Once we return..."

He paused for a moment, and then added:

"...I want you to help me kill it."

A dead silence fell on the small square. After a while, Caster finally spoke, an expression of subtle shock on his face:

"Sunny... did you perhaps misspoke? We are only Sleepers, after all. How are we supposed to kill that Black Knight of yours? A Nightmare Creature of his rank and class..."

Sunny's grin widened. Then, with an immense feeling of vindication, he looked at Caster and said:

"...It's just a fallen devil."

Chapter 189: Sunny's Brilliant Emporium

The expressions on the faces of Casper, Effie and Kai were simply priceless. Sunny had to stop himself from laughing out loud.

...His shadow, however, did not. Luckily, it had no vocal cords, so all it could do was hold its stomach and shudder silently.

'Hey, you! Behave yourself!'

Meanwhile, Nephis just looked at him. The corner of her mouth slightly curled upward.

After a while, Caster was finally able to answer:

"Just a fallen devil? Did you say j..."

However, Changing Star interrupted him. Glancing at the cathedral, she simply shrugged and said:

"This is acceptable."

Everyone became silent. They simply stared at Neph with bewildered expressions.

With some satisfaction, Sunny nodded and said:

"Don't be so quick to judge. We won't be going into that battle unprepared. I spent months studying the bastard. I know his every ability, every trick, and every weakness. More than that... if you can't even handle someone like him, how are you going to challenge Gunalug? Isn't that what this expedition is all about?"

Actually, he debated for a long time whether he should demand that they attack the Black Knight now or after the expedition was over. In the end, he decided that they were all too weak to face the devil... for now. But after months spent in the Labyrinth, things were bound to change.

There were more Nightmare Creatures out there, and most of them were not impossible to kill. By the end of the expedition, every member of the cohort was going to have much more soul essence in their cores than they had now. They would also have a wider arsenal of Memories at their disposal.

More importantly, they would have time to hone and perfect their teamwork. If they wanted to have a chance in a fight against the Black Knight, this was the most important part.

Nephis nodded.

"Sunny is right. It's not like it's impossible to kill a Fallen creature. In fact, both Gemma and Tessai had done so in the past, not to mention Gunlaug himself. It just takes a lot of preparation and a little bit of luck. By the end of this, we should be able to take on a single devil and win, provided that we learn its secrets in advance."

Sunny smiled.

"Exactly! Oh, right. Speaking of preparations..."

While everyone was looking at him with confusion... well, except Cassie, of course... he took the rucksack off his shoulders and placed it on the ground. Then, he opened it, revealing the soft shine of numerous soul shards.

"Welcome to Sunny's Brilliant Emporium! This here is around fifty soul shards, each of them of the Awakened rank. Since we will be venturing into the Labyrinth, I've decided to give you guys an opportunity to empower yourself a bit before facing the terrible dangers of that ghastly place. Of course, I'll give you a family discount..."Pa nda

Novel He had emptied his treasure chest before leaving the hidden chamber. Currently, all of his remaining shards were inside the rucksack.

Of course, he hadn't done so out of the kindness of his heart.

Sunny never had any money and so, understandably, didn't know a lot about how to handle it. But one thing he did know was that rich folk never allowed their riches to sit idly. Even money had to work to create more money once it fell into the hands of the wealthy.

In the language of rich people, this was called an investment.

By investing his shards into the cohort, Sunny was increasing his own chances of making it back alive. No matter how hard he thought, he couldn't imagine a worthier cause.

Plus, he wasn't going to just give the shards away for free.

"The rules of the emporium are rather simple. You give me Memories, I give you shards. I don't care about how powerful or useful the Memories are. In fact, the worse, the better! Any useless junk you have gathering dust in your Soul Sea will do. If you don't have any — no problem. You can just promise to give me a Memory in the future, once you receive one in the Labyrinth."

He smiled at the members of Neph's cohort.

"Not bad, right? No need to thank me, really..."

Kai stared at the shards, then raised his eyes and looked at Sunny:

"Sunny... buddy... please forgive my bluntness, but why do you need all these Memories?"

What a good question. Sunny grinned.

"Uh, you see... how should I put this? Let's just say that there's a beauty I know who just can't get enough of them. If you know what I mean..."

Saying that, he winked at the pretty archer. With a strange expression, Kai turned away and shook his head.

However, after this performance, no one else asked any questions.

In the end, Sunny was able to exchange his shards for five Memories. Nephis distributed the shards between the five members of the cohort, with each of them getting ten.

This was a boon equal to slaying ten awakened beasts. After absorbing the shards, all five of them were going to receive a significant boost to their power.

As far as deadly expeditions went, this was the best start possible.

Without wasting any time, Neph, Cassie, Effie, Kai and Caster absorbed the soul essence from the shards.

While they were busy doing that, Sunny silently dove into the Soul Sea and fed the Memories he had received to the Stone Saint.

[...Stone Saint has grown stronger.]

[...Stone Saint has grown stronger.]

[...Stone Saint has grown stronger.]

Satisfied, he summoned the runes and glanced at them.

Shadow: Stone Saint.

Shadow Fragments: [27/200].

Then, he looked at his own.

Name: Sunless.

True Name: Lost from Light.

Rank: Dreamer.

Shadow Core: Dormant.

Shadow Fragments: [318/1000].

...Not bad.

Looking south, he smiled darkly and wondered...

How much would these numbers increase by the time he returned to the Dark City? It had to be by a lot.

When everyone was done absorbing their shards and getting accustomed to the changes caused by the sudden influx of soul essence, the cohort was ready to move out.

The six of them headed south, cautiously traversing the cursed city.

Nephis was walking in the front of the party, her stark black and white plate armor contrasted sharply against the grey stones of the ancient ruins. A step behind her and to the right was Caster, clad in a polished scale mail that glistened in the morning light like the skin of a silver dragon. To her left was tall and powerful Effie, clad in the archaic bronze armor with a white chiton beneath.

A few steps away, wearing his elegant lamellar armor made out of burnished brown leather, walked Kai. On his back, there was a quiver full of heavy arrows. Cassie was walking beside him, her light tunic and bright cloak just the same as before. However, now there was a sheath with a graceful rapier attached to her belt.

At the very back, with an unhappy expression on his face, was a pale young man with messy black hair and a ragged light armor made out of dark-grey fabric and black, lusterless leather. He was periodically lowering his gaze and grimacing, as though unaccustomed to being in the sun.

Of course, it was Sunny.

Their journey to the edges of the Forgotten Shore had begun.

Chapter 190: Point Of No Return

Sunny was walking at the back of the cohort, but his shadow was scouting ahead. Without it by his side, he was rather uncomfortable.

'I wonder if I can summon the Stone Saint while it is away. How have I never thought to check it?'

Without both his shadow and his Shadow, Sunny felt almost naked. At least he had other people with him, including three powerhouses — Nephis, Caster, and Effie.

Come to think of it, he had never seen Kai in action. The beautiful archer didn't look like someone extremely dangerous, but Sunny wasn't deceived. Weak people did not survive on the Forgotten Shore for years, especially not if their Aspect Ability made them the perfect person to venture outside the Dark City.

With his unique Aspect Ability, Kai had to fight against the type of terrifying creatures that Sunny knew very little about, too — the flying abominations that lived in the clouds. Like the Spire Messengers.

'Scary.'

Speaking of Kai...

Sunny hastened his steps and caught up to the charming young man. Glancing at Cassie, who did not seem like she wanted to say anything to him, he frowned for a moment, and then turned to Nightingale:

"Hey there, Night. How's life?"

The archer looked at him with a friendly smile.

"Oh, hey. Good, I guess? I mean... the weather is nice."

Sunny blinked a couple of times. The weather was never nice on the Forgotten Shore. It was either too cold, too damp, or too hot. Honestly, he even missed the Black Mountain sometimes. At least it was consistent.

Not one to make polite talk, Sunny went straight to the question he really wanted to ask:

"So, really... what are you doing here?"

Kai glanced at him with a bit of confusion.

"What do you mean?"

Sunny sighed.

"From what you told me, your life in the castle was nothing short of peaceful. You have enough shards to stay there for a long time, everyone likes you, and even the Host treats you nicely because of how useful your Ability is. Why would you risk it all to go with us into the Labyrinth?"

The beautiful archer lingered for a bit.

"Ah. Well... actually, I landed in a bit of trouble. I think. The deaths of those Guards who locked me in the well are being used to frame Effie, are they not? Well, what if someone knows that I am connected to their disappearance? Won't I be in danger?"

Sunny thought about it for a bit, then reluctantly agreed.

"Makes sense. But won't the danger you will face in this expedition be much worse than the one you are escaping from?"

Kai smiled.

"It certainly will. But, Sunny... there is something else that you failed to consider."

Sunny frowned.

"What's that? Please... please don't tell me that you became one of Neph's converts."

The charming young man chuckled.

"Converts? No, I don't think so. At least not in the way you think."

He was silent for a long time, then sighed.

"Actually, I don't think that many people see things clearly. But really, it's not that hard to understand."

Turning to Sunny with a somber expression on his usually carefree face, Kai suddenly asked:

"I came to the Forgotten Shore thirty-one months ago. Do you know how many of us reached the Dark City that year?"

Sunny shook his head.

The archer grimaced.

"Almost four hundred. And do you know how many are still alive? Less than two."

He was silent for a while. Pa nda

Novel "Which means that, in just two years, more than half of us perished. People die all the time in the Dark City, you see. The castle may seem safe, but actually, the Host is constantly bleeding people. Every week, a few hunters don't return from the hunt. Every couple of weeks, a Nightmare Creature attacks the walls and kills several Guards before they manage to drive it away or destroy it."

Kai sighed.

"But most often of all, something comes into the outer settlement and simply drags away people. That's not even mentioning those who die of

hunger, desperation, or by another human's hand. Do you... do you see where I am going with this?"

Sunny scowled, a new understanding dawning on him. Seeing his expression, Kai looked away.

"Indeed. Every year, hundreds of people die in the Dark City. And every year, hundreds more come to take their place. But, Sunny... this year, there were only four. Not four hundred, but just four people."

How.. how had he not thought about it before? Sunny's eyes widened slightly.

Meanwhile, Kai continued:

"Which means that the Bright Castle never got the chance to recoup its losses. What happens if that Spell Cycle theory that people have is true and five months from now, when the winter solstice comes, the same thing repeats itself?"

He shook his head, a dark expression on his face.

"It means that a year from now, there will be maybe six hundred humans left in the Dark City. And two years from now... there will be only a dozen or two. It takes a lot of people to maintain the semblance of civilization we have going on here, Sunny. Once we pass the point of no return, it will all come crashing down."

The beautiful archer glanced at him and added in a heavy tone:

"Every non-combatant will die. Every fighter who is not powerful enough will die. Eventually, only a few strongest ones will be left. Am I strong enough to be among those few? I'm not sure. And even if I am, who would want to live in a situation like that."

He turned away and stared at Nephis, who was walking ahead of them.

"So no, Sunny, I am not a convert. But I will follow Lady Nephis to the edges of the Labyrinth and back, because it's better to die trying to do

something than to live on hiding your head in the sand. Don't you think?"

Just like that, their conversation ended. Sunny walked on in silence, thinking about what Kai had said.

If the archer was right, then the future was, indeed, nothing short of disturbing. Of course, no one knew for sure how many Sleepers were going to arrive here during the winter solstice. But now that he thought about it, Sunny felt that people who believed in the cyclic nature of the arrivals were almost right.

He also believed that there would not be hundreds of new faces arriving on the Forgotten Shore in five months.

However, while others expected that there would be a dozen, a few dozen after a year, and a hundred after that, he did not.

For some reason, Sunny felt that there won't be anyone else coming to the Dark City at all.

He felt that the three of them... and Caster... were the last people to ever be sent to this hell by the Spell.

'Gee. What's up with people today? First Effie and her doomsday talk, now this. I am already an extremely pessimistic person. I don't need anyone's help to feel terrible about the future...'

But as it turned out, he did need help. These two conversations had opened Sunny's eyes to a serious problem.

He was too shortsighted. He concentrated too much on the problems at hand and failed to see the bigger picture. Was it because both Effie and Kai had spent more time on the Forgotten Shore, or was it because he had simply not paid enough attention to the details?

Would things be different if he had?

Just as Sunny glanced at Nephis, Cassie suddenly turned her head in his direction.

Sunny frowned.

"What is it?"

'She has been ignoring me this whole time, but now she wants to talk? Huh.'

The blind girl hesitated for a moment, and then quietly said:

"...Something is following us."

Chapter 191: Pursuer | Shadow Slave

"Something is following us."

Sunny's frown deepened. Not wasting any time, he moved forward and caught up to Nephis, Caster, and Effie. The huntress glanced at him and slightly tensed.

"Did your shadow notice an enemy?"

The shadow was currently a few hundred meters ahead of the cohort, scouting for any signs of danger.

He shook his head.

"Cassie felt that we are being followed. I'm going to withdraw the shadow and sent it back to take a look. Stay vigilant."

Effie gave him a nod. Of course, as the pathfinder of the party, she was always vigilant. He was just warning her so that she could adjust her approach.

The two of them were well accustomed to working together, so there was no need to waste words.

Sunny commanded the shadow to return and fell back to the rear of the party. Once there, he concentrated on the shadows that surrounded them, trying to feel if there was something there that could not be seen.

But there was nothing.

Ahead of him, the rest of the cohort was silently preparing for the worst. Not wishing to let the unknown pursuer know that they were ready to act, no one summoned their weapons yet. No one had even turned their head. However, Sunny could see from the tension in their muscles that this peacefulness could explode into a storm of movement at any moment.

Changing Star and her hunting party did not earn their fearsome reputation by mistake.

Finally, the shadow was back. Not letting it rest even for a second, Sunny immediately sent it to observe the streets that they had just left. His perception was split between its vision and his own.

The feeling of vulnerability he experienced when the shadow was away heightened. Sunny sighed with grim resignation. The fact that he was at the back of the cohort and, as such, would be attacked first if anything happened did not help one bit.

'Calm down. You don't even know what is tracking the cohort.'

A few moments later, the shadow was safely hidden in the darkness of a ruined building, observing the crossroad that one would have to pass to follow them. Sunny continued walking, pretending to not know anything.

A few seconds passed in tense silence, then a few more.

'Where are you? What are you?'

Depending on the nature of the mysterious pursuer, their response would be different. If it was a Nightmare Creature, they would either have to fight it or try to throw it off their scent. However, if the creature turned out to be one of the truly horrifying existences that stalked the ancient ruins... then things would get really tricky.

There was also another possibility. And that was that they were not being pursued by a monster, but by humans instead. A team of Hunters might have been sent by Gunlaug to ambush Changing Star and her people.

If that was the case... honestly, Sunny didn't know what would happen. However, he was sure of their ability to withstand an attack from the Host, even if the enemy held a numerical advantage.

The others seemed to share the same thought.

After a few minutes passed, the shadow finally noticed movement. Someone was slowly walking in the middle of the street, not even trying to hide their presence. At first, Sunny thought that it was one of the revenants that populated the Dark City. The figure, while human in appearance, was strangely crooked, with a dark unadorned cloak hiding its limbs and features. But then...

Sunny suddenly felt cold fear grip his heart.

He recognized those glassy, lifeless eyes. The hideous pale face that terrified so many people.

...Harus. It was Harus. The murderous butcher who had torn Jubei apart with his bare hands, Gunalug's cruel executioner and hidden blade. p anda

Novel Walking through the cursed ruins with the same bored expression that he had in the grand hall of the Bright Castle on the day of Jubei's execution, Harus was following in their footsteps.

Gunlaug did not send dozens of Hunters to ambush Changing Star. Instead, he sent just one man.

Sunny shivered.

'Damn it. Why... why am I so afraid of that guy?'

But he knew why. It was because, deep down, he felt that they were alike. Harus was the personification of everything that Sunny was afraid to become.

Trying to shake off his fear, Sunny walked forward and glanced at Nephis. Then, he said in a raspy voice:

"It's that... that damn hunchback. He's following us."

A sudden tension permeated the air. Without having to look, Sunny knew that everyone's faces grew dark.

Harus was a mystery. No one knew what his Aspect Ability was, let alone his Flaw. All that was known about this terrifying man was that he was very powerful, and that not a single victim of his had survived.

Neph frowned.

"Is he alone?"

Sunny nodded.

"Yeah."

To his right, Caster quietly scoffed.

"What is Gunlaug thinking, sending one man against us six?"

However, Neph did not share his disdain. Turning to her left, she glanced at Effie. There was a grim expression on her face.

"What do you think?"

The huntress hesitated for a few moments. Then, looking down from her considerable height, she simply said:

"I think we need to run."

Caster scowled.

"Run? Why? Surely, no matter how strong Harus is, we can take him down. None of us are weak, either. Even if we can't defeat him one on one..."

Effie shook her head.

"You don't get it, do you? We can't fight Harus. No one can. Many people have tried, and they're all dead now."

She gritted her teeth.

"He is a monster in human flesh, Caster. He is insanely powerful. But that's not even the problem. The problem is that no one knows his Aspect. All we know is that once Harus comes for you, you die."

She sighed.

"I've seen many people try to resist once they caught wind that Gunlaug is going to send Harus to get rid of them. Strong people, weak people. Some tried to fight him alone, others recruited fearsome allies. Come the next morning, all of them were dead. No matter how powerful they were or how many of them gathered to give him a fight, no one ever survived. All that was left was blood and corpses..."

Chapter 192: Lighthouse | Shadow Slave

As somber silence settled among the cohort, Effie grimaced.

"The weirdest part is, no one has even seen him come and go. Every time Harus was sent into the outer settlement, we only learned that people were dead in the morning. Doors, locks, and barricades can't seem to stop him, either. Once Harus is ordered to kill you, you just die. It is as though fate itself abandons you."

Caster frowned.

"So are you telling us that we stand no chance?"

The huntress shook her head.

"I'm saying that fighting him right now would be stupid. Not unless we learn how he is able to seemingly turn his victims... no matter how many of them there are... completely powerless."

With that, she glanced at Nephis, who lingered for a moment and then shook her head.

"Our friend in the castle doesn't know either."

Effie grinned.

"Ah, so that mysterious friend of yours is not omniscient after all. Well, in that case, my advice stands. We should run."

At that moment, Sunny finally spoke up:

"But, Effie... can we even run away from him?"

The smile disappeared from her face. Suddenly grim, she hesitated for a while, and then said:

"I know of a way. But... it's going to be dangerous. Very dangerous. However, I don't know how else to shake him off our trail. So you decide, princess."

Neph was silent for a bit, and then simply nodded.

"We will face Harus some other day. Right now, reaching the resting place of the first cohort is the priority."

The unruly huntress exhales, almost as if relieved. Then, she said:

"Then follow me. And prepare yourself..."

After that disturbing discussion, Effie changed their course slightly. Instead of moving straight south, they were now traversing the ancient city heading for its eastern border.

Sunny wasn't too familiar with this part of the ruins. During the past few months, he mostly stayed north of the Bright Castle, sometimes venturing northeast. He stayed away from the western areas because they were closer to the Crimson Spire, and had not explored much of the south because it was too far away from his cathedral.

The last time he had been here was on the day of the bloody fight against the Spire Messenger. Back then, they were headed for the ruins of the lighthouse that had once stood near the impregnable wall of the Dark City.

Not that he had a lot of time to observe the surroundings. Pretty much all of his attention was concentrated on Harus, who was following them like a hound.

He didn't like having to stare at the menacing hunchback at all.

'Why don't you go fight some Fallen creature and die, bastard?'

However, Harus seemed to know the ruins just as well as Effie. He somehow avoided the worst creatures on his path while never losing the

scent of Changing Star's cohort. At one point, a lone Blood Fiend attacked him from the deep shadows of a dilapidated building. Gunlaug's executioner simply raised a hand and shattered the skull of the Nightmare Creature with one lazy punch.

He didn't even blink.

'Big deal. I... I killed plenty of those, too.' P and a

Novel However, Sunny had to admit that he was deeply unnerved by the power of the murderous hunchback. Maybe because he couldn't get rid of the feeling that by the end of it all, only one of them would remain alive.

And he wasn't sure which one.

Soon, they were nearing the tall expanse of the city wall. Not too far away, the remnant of a giant tower lay broken on its side, stretching far away into the distance. The buildings that the tower had fallen on thousands of years ago were shattered and turned into dust.

The ancient lighthouse might have been proud and magnificent once. Perhaps it had even served as a symbol of the defiant will of the people of the ancient city, burning as a shining beacon in the eternal darkness of the cursed night. But it had fallen a long time ago... just like the people that built it.

At least its ruin remained. The ancient inhabitants of the Dark City had just vanished, not even leaving bones behind.

Sunny sighed.

"Where to now?"

Effie gestured at the massive ruin.

"Inside."

They were currently hiding in a collapsed building near the collapsed tower. This area was populated by an especially vile tribe of monsters, and

attracting their attention would spell trouble for the entire cohort.

"Call your shadow back and keep it close. When we enter the lighthouse, we will have to act quick."

Somewhat relieved, Sunny did just that. Not having to look at Harus anymore was a reason for celebration.

Staying low to the ground, the six of them dashed from their hiding spot to the broken lighthouse. Without wasting any time, they found a breach in its wall and climbed inside.

Effie summoned her radiant Memory, bathing the interior of the ruined tower in light. Due to the fact that it was currently lying on its side, they found themselves in a massive, echoing tunnel.

Looking around, Effie found her bearings and led them deeper into the tunnel, extreme tension apparent in her every move. While walking, she began to speak:

"Listen to me very carefully and do as I say. Once we're inside, don't separate from the group. Stay together and keep your weapons at hand. The place we're going to is full of Nightmare Creatures. They're not too strong, but they're... special."

She bit her lip.

"Don't even try to kill them. Just defend yourself and keep moving. If you stop, you'll most probably die. Same thing if you slow down and get yourself surrounded. But if we can preserve our formation... we might survive. I hope."

'You hope? What do you mean, you hope?!'

Before Sunny could voice his outrage, they reached their destination.

Right in front of him, the floor of the tunnel was broken, forming a narrow crevice. It was filled with darkness, leading deep down into the ground...

and then deeper still. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't see what was at the bottom.

The huntress glanced at him.

"What are you waiting for, doofus? Jump!"

Sunny gulped.

"You want me to jump... into that?"

By his side, Kai sighed and looked down on his freshly cleaned, stylish armor. An expression of pure sadness appeared on his beautiful face.

"Oh, well. Here we go again..."

Chapter 193: The Catacombs | Shadow Slave

Without wasting any time, Nephis silently jumped into the crevice. Just before she did, white flames ignited in her eyes. The darkness swallowed her lithe figure whole, like the maw of some unknown creature.

'Damn it all.'

With a resentful expression on his face, Sunny stepped forward. However, before he could approach the crevice, Caster inadvertently blocked his path. A moment later, the proud Legacy was gone, too.

Sunny lingered for a moment and then looked back. He wanted to check if Cassie needed help going down, but he didn't have to worry. Kai was already gently holding her in his arms.

The charming archer softly rose into the air, hovered there for a second, and then glided into the darkness. Sunny blinked a couple of times and shook his head.

'Show-off...'

Effie soon followed the rest of the party, taking her radiant Memory with her. Left alone in the darkness, Sunny shivered, wrapped himself in the shadow, and jumped down.

He fell for a few seconds and then landed on hard stone, the impact sending a painful tremor through his bones. Standing up, Sunny found himself in a narrow tunnel. Its walls were made out of weathered stone, clearly put there by human hands. The rest of the cohort was already there, preparing for battle.

Nephis had summoned her silver longsword. Because the tunnel was not wide enough to freely use it, she was holding it with both hands — one armored gauntlet rested on the hilt, while the other was on the blade itself, halfway to its tip.

Caster was wielding a sword, too. However, his was a graceful jian with beautiful patterns etched on its blade, with a triangular guard carved out of green jade. Sunny didn't know what was the tier of that Memory, but he knew that it was extremely powerful. He had seen it cut through flesh, bone, and steel alike.

Currently, the jian was emanating a ghostly green light.

Effie had summoned her large round shield, but chose to leave the ancient bronze spear in the Soul Sea. While she was skilled enough to make use of it even in this narrow space, the shield would be much more formidable, especially considering her herculean strength.

Kai looked rather gloomy. Casting a mournful look over his shoulder, on the fletching of his heavy arrows, he sighed and outstretched his hand. Instead of a bow, an elegant falcata appeared in it. The beautiful curve of its blade glinted, reflecting the light.

The last one to draw her weapon was Cassie. Unexpectedly, she unsheathed a slender rapier from the scabbard that was attached to her belt... and let go of it. To Sunny's surprise, the rapier did not fall to the ground, but rather stayed floating in the air, as if attached to the blind girl by an invisible string.

Then it rotated slightly and hovered in front of her... with its tip pointing straight at Sunny. Pan da

Novel "Uh... what?"

Cassie smiled and turned her head to him.

"Ah, please forgive Quiet Dancer. She is shy around strangers."

Sunny scratched the back of his head. Sensing his confusion, Cassie explained:

"Dancer is an Echo and a partner of mine. We work well together."

As if answering her words, the rapier suddenly circled around the blind girl and returned to its... her?... previous position. It was still pointing at Sunny in a rather unfriendly way, though.

"Huh... alright."

Interrupting their conversation, Effie called out to him:

"Hey, Sunny. Now would be the perfect time to invite your girlfriend to join us."

The rest of the cohort stared at them with confused expressions.

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"How many times do I have to tell you, she's not my girlfriend!"

Noticing the weird stares that people were giving him, he sighed.

"Effie! Tell them!"

The huntress did not even continue to tease him. Just this fact alone told Sunny how dire their situation really was...

"Sunny also has an Echo, and a powerful one at that. Go on, summon her."

He did, and a moment later, the Stone Saint stepped into the tunnel out of his shadow. Her ruby eyes were burning with crimson flames from behind the visor of the helmet. The taciturn monster briefly glanced at the people gathered around it, and then indifferently turned away to peer into the darkness.

Just like that, their group of six had turned into a group of eight... well, if a moody flying rapier could be counted to be a member.

...Suddenly, a distant noise made everyone freeze for a moment. With a dark expression, Effie looked in the direction it came from and sighed.

"Right. We've wasted enough time already. Follow me... and be ready."

With that, she took a step forward and headed deeper into the tunnel. Sunny followed, commanding the Stone Saint to stay close to Kai and Cassie.

After a while, something crunched under his foot. Looking down, he saw... a bone. A human bone.

"What is this place?"

The huntress glanced back, and then answered in a somber tone:

"The catacombs."

He frowned.

"Since when are there catacombs beneath the Dark City? Why have I never heard you mention them?"

Effie lingered before answering:

"The catacombs were always here. They span beneath the whole city, it's just that most of the tunnels had collapsed a long time ago. As to why hunters don't like to mention them... it's because very few are crazy enough to explore what little remains of the catacombs, and even fewer return to tell the tale."

Then, she added:

"No matter how powerful Harus is, a person can only survive here if they know their way around. And only a couple of us, outer settlement hunters, do. So we should be able to lose him."

Meanwhile, Sunny noticed more and more bones littering the ground. All of them looked like they had once belonged to humans.

'I don't like this.'

Looking up, he asked:

"Can we get back to that thing you said about how very few people manage to escape from here alive? Why is that?"

The huntress grimaced.

"That's because..."

However, before she was done speaking, something appeared out of the darkness and barred their way.

Sunny opened his eyes wide.

Right there in front of them, a corpse was standing on the edge between light and darkness, staring at the six humans with the black chasms of its empty eyes sockets.

...No, not really a corpse. A skeleton.

Defying all laws of logic and physics, a creature made of nothing but human bones suddenly lunged forward, baring its teeth in a hungry grin.

Chapter 194: Aching Bones | Shadow Slave

'How... how the hell is this thing even moving?'

Defying all logic, the skeleton lunged at Effie with a speed that even Sunny himself wasn't capable of. With no muscle tissue connecting the bones together, the strange creature was still able to stand upright, run... and attack with vicious strength.

A moment before the undead monster closed the distance between them, Effie screamed:

"Stay together!"

Then, she turned her torso and slammed her shield against the lunging monstrosity. With a thunderous crack, the skeleton was thrown back. Its skull and ribcage shattered, showering the tunnel with sharp bone splinters. Like a broken marionette, it fell to the ground in a shapeless pile.

Sunny stared at the mess of broken bones with in confusion.

'Wait... that's it?'

The huntress yelled, tearing him away from these thoughts:

"Don't stop, move!"

The cohort rushed forward, following Effie into the depths of the catacombs. When Sunny was approaching the remains of the reanimated skeleton, he noticed something that made a cold chill run down his spine.

The bones were still moving, slowly assembling themselves back into the shape that resembled a human. Just as he stepped past the creature, one skeletal hand suddenly thrust in his direction, trying to claw at his leg. If not for Sunny's quick reaction, it might have succeeded in injuring him.

With one slash of the Midnight Shard, he crushed the clawing hand and threw it away. Falling on the stones a few meters back, the hand remained motionless for a moment, and then began crawling back to the quickly recovering skeleton.

The monster was being rebuilt by some terrifying, invisible force. Drawn by its unseen pull, the bones were putting themselves back together one after another. Those too damaged to be of use were simply replaced by one of the bones scattered on the floor of the tunnel. Soon, the skeleton would inevitably rise again.

A disturbing thought entered Sunny's mind.

He finally realized why Effie had told them to keep moving instead of trying to kill the Nightmare Creatures populating the catacombs.

Was it because these creatures were... immortal?

...Or rather, undying.

Sunny felt a sickening premonition that he was right. If so, things were going to turn from bad to harrowing pretty fast...

It was at that moment that his ears caught a distant rustle coming from the darkness ahead of them. For a moment, he felt fear grip his heart, thinking that the dark sea had somehow found its way into the catacombs.

But no, this wasn't the cursed sea. Instead, it was dozens... no, hundreds of skeletal feet scraping against the cold stones of the catacombs.

Maybe even thousands of them.

The hordes of undead monsters populating the catacombs were coming to rip the six humans apart.

With a grimace of dark resentment on his face, Sunny gripped the Midnight Shard tighter and hurried after the other members of the cohort.

'Come... come and get it, bastards!'

Pretty soon, the undead creatures were upon them. First in ones and pairs, then in small groups, the bloodthirsty skeletons assaulted them in a constant stream. Appearing from the darkness of the catacombs, they lunged at the cohort in a whirlwind of bony claws and teeth, each bearing the same eerie skeletal grin.

Effie and Nephis, who were at the front of the group, faced the brunt of the attacks. The huntress exerted her inhuman strength, bulldozing through the skeletons like an incarnation of ancient fury. Her round shield acted as a wrecking ball, shattering the undead monsters left and right.

Nephis fought with the elegant fluidity of water... but also with the crushing force of a devastating flood. She was holding the longsword by the blade, using its crossguard and pommel as an improvised mace. With white flames dancing in her eyes, she moved from one skeleton to another, skillfully deflecting their blows and crushing one skull after another.

If anything got past them, Caster was there to deliver the finishing blow. His sword shone with a ghostly green light, slicing through bones as if without meeting any resistance. The proud Legacy fought with graceful precision, always managing to immobilize the enemy with just one clean strike. The skeletons fell to his sword before even having a chance to retaliate.

The three powerhouses made paving the path through the horde of monsters seem almost easy. However, Sunny knew that it was anything but. Each skeleton was stronger and faster than a human could ever be. It took incredible skill, resolve, and coordination to cut through their ranks without slowing down even for a second.

Soon, he was forced to taste the true menace of these undead abominations for himself.

Sunny, Cassie, and Kai were relatively safe at first, but with each passing minute, their situation worsened.

The catacombs were a real maze. More and more often, the tunnels they were taking began to open into complicated crossroads and connect with other branching paths. When that happened, undead creatures could lunge at the cohort from the side, bypassing the impenetrable barrier of Changing Star and her two champions.

More than that, as the number of skeletons destroyed by them increased and several minutes passed, the abominable monsters began rising back from the ground and dashing in pursuit of the party, soon attacking it from the rear.

Eventually, the cohort was constantly assaulted from all sides.

When Sunny first had to raise his sword to repel a straggler that lunged at him from the side tunnel, he acted with calm precision engraved into him by countless hours of practice. Slashing with the Midnight Shard, he cleanly beheaded the undead creature. Augmented by the shadow, his tachi managed to cut through solid bone without that much effort.

Sunny knew that losing its head won't kill the skeleton, so he instantly shifted his balance and kicked the monster in the chest, throwing it back.

Although he expected that this would happen, the lack of the familiar voice whispering into his ear still unnerved him. Usually, he would have heard the announcement of the kill already.

But these abominations were immortal, so the Spell remained silent.

Lamenting the fact that he would not be getting any shadow fragments today, Sunny moved away from the decapitated skeleton and sighed.

'Well, at least this isn't as bad as I thought it would be.'

...But just a few minutes later, he bitterly regretted thinking those words aloud.

Chapter 195: Rolling Battle | Shadow Slave

Once the cohort was surrounded from every side, Sunny, Cassie and Kai had to join the battle in earnest.

Sunny wasn't too worried for the blind girl and the archer because they were protected by both the Stone Saint and the Quiet Dancer.

His Shadow was possibly the worst enemy the bloodthirsty skeletons could face. Moving with the cold precision of an emotionless battle machine, she used both her sword and shield to deflect and destroy any enemy that dared to approach them from the sides. The graceful and devastating dance she was performing was a true sight to behold.

The Quiet Dancer zipped through the air, supporting the Shadow and covering any lapse left in the barrier of steel created by her. If something got past the two of them, Kai was there, using the curved blade of his falcata to crush the undead monsters, almost as if felling them with an axe.

He was holding hands with Cassie, guiding the blind girl through the dark maze of the catacombs. However, it seemed as though her ability to orient herself in space had seen a considerable improvement in the past three months, perhaps due to the connection she shared with the flying rapier. She was now able to move quickly without using her wooden staff for support, at least.

Looking at the two of them, Sunny grew somewhat sullen. Both Kai and Cassie were incredibly beautiful people. Holding hands and surrounded by nothing but darkness and monsters, with the charming young man gripping an elegant sword, they looked like an image from a book cover. They looked perfect together.

Sunny, on the other hand...

Well, at least he had his shadow to keep him company. And the Ordinary Rock...

However, he didn't have a lot of time to wallow in self-pity. Because his was the second most important role in this furious moving battle: holding the rear of the cohort all by himself.

'Let me show you what I'm capable of...'

As more and more skeletons rose from the ground and attacked the party from behind, Sunny had to really exert himself.

At first, he only had to fight one undead monster at a time. Despite their tremendous speed and strength, the skeletal creatures were not that hard to defeat. They seemed almost mindless, always attacking in the most straightforward way possible. Of course, a less prepared person would have been torn apart by these fierce creatures a long time ago...

But Sunny was not the same weak and inexperienced kid he had been seven months ago. The harrowing trials of the Forgotten Shore, as well as his tenacious will and grim resolve, had turned him into a fearsome creature, too.

In fact, in terms of pure viciousness, the skeletons had nothing on him at all.

Wrapping the Midnight Shard into the shadow to slice through the tough bones of the undead monsters easier, Sunny employed every bit of battle prowess he had learned from his practice with the Stone Saint to destroy his enemies.

Seamlessly weaving the firm and unassailable movements that he had learned from the taciturn stone creature into the flowing style taught to him by Nephis, he made short work of one skeleton after another. His blade sliced, slashed, and pierced through monster after monster, sending broken bones flying and cluttering to the ground.

Of course, maintaining this state without falling behind the cohort was not easy. Sunny had never practiced fighting while on the run, especially not while moving backward. However, remembering Effie's words, he knew that being separated from the group and surrounded meant death, and thus made sure to never get too far away from his companions.

At first, the situation was if not easy, then at least within the scope of his capability. Sunny even thought that this was an excellent opportunity to put everything that he had learned in the past week to practice. Despite the fact that this battle was completely different from the way he had hunted monsters before, he was doing fine.

Back on the streets of the Dark City, he hunted at night, always attacking the enemy from the shadows and aiming to finish the fight with one strike. The initiative was on his side, and so he was the one dictating the flow of the combat.

However, right now, things were completely reversed. Sunny was the one being attacked, with enemies suddenly appearing from the darkness and instantly lunging at him. Put on the defensive, he had to react to the enemy attacks as opposed to being the one attacking.

And yet, he was managing. He had anticipated that a situation like that would inevitably happen and put enough flexibility into his technique to withstand any type of peril. He was indeed putting his lessons to practice, cementing them in his muscles and bones. After all, just like Nephis had said, a thousand hours of training was not as impactful as one real fight.

...But then, slowly, things began to change.

After he had ruthlessly cut down a handful of undead abominations, suddenly, two attacked him at the same time. Sunny cursed and ducked to the side, narrowly avoiding having his head crushed by one of the skeletons. His sword blocked the vicious strike from the other one, and, being pushed back a couple of steps by the force of the impact, he struggled to keep his balance.

Not letting the monsters continue their assault unobstructed, Sunny dashed forward and twisted his body. Kicking one creature in the chest, he used it to propel himself toward the other one and put all that weight into a devastating downward slash.

The skeleton crumbled into a pile of broken bones, and the edge of the Midnight Shard scraped against the stones, causing sparks to fly into the air.

Knowing that his momentum was too strong to stop now, Sunny instead went with it, rolled over his shoulder, and got back to his feet just in time to meet the attack of the remaining monster face to face.

His sword cut a sharp arc, severing both arms of the skeleton. Sunny instantly sidestepped the undead creature and delivered a low horizontal slash, breaking its legs.

Making sure that the monster wouldn't be standing up any time soon by piercing its skull with the tip of the Midnight Shard, he hurried to catch up with the cohort.

Briefly glancing at the rest of his companions, he made sure that they were not dead yet and swiftly turned around, ready to face the next monster.

Then, his heart skipped a beat.

'Curses!'

Three skeletons were rushing at him, menacing grins frozen on their skinless faces.

Chapter 196: Divine Intervention | Shadow Slave

After that, things became hectic.

Sunny had to push himself to the limit to fight against multiple opponents while maintaining the pace with the rest of the group. Knowing that slowing down meant death, he slashed, dodged, blocked and moved back without allowing himself even a moment of respite. Slowly but surely, countless wounds began accumulating on his body.

But even then, it wasn't enough.

So he pushed himself past his limit.

After all, this was the exact situation he had been preparing himself for by enduring the ruthless onslaught of the Stone Saint day after day. The inevitability of having to fight against an overwhelming force.

Dark, vehement fury ignited in his chest, washing away pain and fear.

"Come, come and get me! I'm right here!"

Who did they think they were trying to kill?

Noticing four new abominations answer his call, Sunny couldn't help but laugh.

'Good... good...'

Their assault came fast and without mercy, not leaving him any room to breathe. But Sunny welcomed it.

Dodging one of the skeletons, he dashed forward and positioned himself behind another one, so that its body blocked the path of the third.

He couldn't do anything about the fourth one for the moment, but its attack was accounted for... it was going to hurt like hell, but not to the point of

killing him. Blood Weave was going to take care of the rest.

The Midnight Shard cut through the air and severed the undead creature's knee, causing it to clumsily fall to the ground. At the same time, cold fingers tore into Sunny's side. He had already shifted his body to make sure that they were not going to damage any vital organs.

With Puppeteer's Shroud taking most of the damage, Sunny only ended up receiving five deep scratches, which then instantly welled with blood.

'Ah! Crap! That hurts!'

But he didn't regret it. The only thing he regretted was the fact that, with the shadow wrapped around the Midnight Shard, he couldn't observe its movement during this long and arduous fight.

Just imagining the kind of insight he could have gleaned from it filled him with avarice.

Turning around and reversing his grip on the sword, Sunny commanded the shadow to move onto his body. Almost instantly, he felt a rush of power fill his muscles. In the same fluid movement, Sunny took a step toward the monster that had just wounded him and delivered a crushing blow with the pommel of the tachi.

The skeleton's jaw flew away in a rain of broken teeth. Taking another quick step, Sunny circled around the disoriented creature, hooked his hand around its damaged skull, and tore it clean off the spine.

Then he pushed the decapitated creature into the two remaining ones, briefly slowing down their approach. By the time the undead abominations regained their balance, Sunny was already upon them. The Midnight Shard flashed three times, turning the three skeletons into three piles of bones.

Taking a step back, he narrowly avoided the claws of the last remaining skeleton — the one whose leg he had chopped off at the start of the skirmish. Sunny glanced at the creature that was madly crawling toward him and finished it off with one powerful thrust.

Then, he groaned.

'Ah, crap... I think I overdid it...'

Sunny was bruised, hurting all over, and covered in blood. What's worse, he was exhausted. This moving battle was too intense and had lasted for too long. Even with his endurance enhanced by the Blood Weave, he was nearing the point where his performance would start dropping rapidly.

Once that happened, he would die. Because the damn undead creatures were not only immortal, but also tireless.

Just as this thought appeared in Sunny's mind, a new wave of skeletons lunged at him from the depths of the tunnel.

Tiredly raising his sword, he gritted his teeth.

'Time for plan B...'

At some point, the tunnel they were currently in was briefly drowned in a brilliant wave of pure white light. Glancing over his shoulder, Sunny noticed that Nephis had finally summoned her flames, channeling them into the blade of her sword — just like on the day they had fought against the Carapace Demon.

Faced with the blinding radiance of the incandescent blade, the skeletons almost seemed to melt.

'Perfect timing!'

Using the momentary disorientation of his own opponents, Sunny dashed back and commanded the Stone Saint to switch places with him. As they passed each other, he sent the shadow from his own body onto that of the taciturn stone knight.

Almost immediately, the Shadow Saint's eyes blazed with menacing carmine fire. Her skin shone with dark radiance, and wisps of ghostly grey

fog appeared from beneath her stonelike armor like dancing flames. The impenetrable darkness of the catacombs suddenly seemed to become even deeper, embracing her like a vast black mantle.

'Yeah, I have some tricks up my sleeve too...'

A second later, the Shadow crashed into the undead creatures, sending splinters of bones and severed limbs flying through the air. She proceeded to massacre them, moving from one to another in a graceful storm of darkness and destruction.

Taking her place near Kai and Cassie, Sunny was finally able to rest for a few seconds. His battered body was screaming with pain, and the grey fabric of the Puppeteer's Shroud had turned heavy with blood.

With two wielders of Divine Aspects activating their hidden cards almost simultaneously, the cohort got a chance to catch their breaths for a few short moments. However, it was clear that this calm wouldn't last long.

Sunny didn't really want to show all his cards yet, but the situation left him little choice. He doubted he could continue this mad dash for much longer. Plus, chances were that the rest of the party, preoccupied as they were with their own share of the undead monsters, would either fail to notice the sudden alteration happening to the Stone Saint or assume that it was just an Ability of hers.

Using the opportunity, Sunny took a look at the condition of his companions.

...It was not good.

Changing Star's armor was battered and torn, with blood seeping down her right side. Effie's shield looked like it was on the verge of coming apart, while her white chiton was painted red. Caster managed to preserve some semblance of a collected look, however, there was a deep gash under one of his eyes, his face bloodied and grim.

Kai was doing not much better. He was pale and visibly exhausted, his auburn hair disheveled and soaked with sweat.

...Sunny didn't even want to think about his own sorry appearance.

Only Cassie, whose tier-six armor made her less likely to be attacked by an enemy, looked more or less fine. However, her flying rapier had several visible nicks on its slender blade, and looked tired and dispirited overall... as much as a flying weapon could look like anything.

In short, one thing was painfully apparent from their state.

If things didn't change soon, all of them were going to die...

Skillfully using his sword to cut down a skeleton that had suddenly lunged at him from a side passage, Sunny strained his lungs and shouted:

"Hey! Effie! How far are we from the exit from this damned place?! When is this going to end?!"

Swatting away an undead monster of her own, the huntress briefly glanced back and grinned.

"What do you mean, "end"?!"

'What does she mean what do I mean? Isn't it obvious?'

Turning back to concentrate on the horde of enemies in front of them, Effie yelled:

"What end?! This was just a warm-up!"

Chapter 197: Ultimate Test | Shadow Slave

Sunny cursed and prepared himself for the worst. A few moments later, the short respite they had gotten was over.

With a sound that reminded him of rushing water, a terrifying wave of undead monsters crashed into their formation, threatening to break it apart. Effie braced for the impact and withstood the furious onslaught, somehow managing to split the wave in two.

From one side, Changing Star dove into the torrent of skeletal wraiths, her incandescent sword cutting through them like a ray of pure sunlight piercing the darkness. From the other, Caster's enchanted blade was doing the same. The scion of the Han Li clan moved with astonishing speed, turning into a blurry whirlwind of ghostly green steel.

Everything that touched it turned to dust.

Sunny glanced at Kai and said in a hoarse voice:

"Prepare yourself."

In the next moment, the wave of monsters was upon them.

Left without the comforting protection of his shadow, Sunny could only rely on his own ability, cunning, and technique. Dashing forward, he clashed with the first skeleton. His sword flashed through the air with lightning speed, and a headless corpse instantly fell to his feet, blindly clawing at the stones in front of it.

Sunny had never fought like this. From the first day on the Forgotten Shore, he always had something helping him resist the horrors of the Dream Realm — be it his shadow, cover of darkness, Changing Star, or the Stone Saint. Now, he had to face the torrent of Nightmare Creature with nothing but his own frail human body... and resolve.

This was the ultimate test of pure skill.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny tried to remember the feeling of clarity he had experienced after the carapace centurion had crushed his ribcage with one strike of its terrifying bone scythe. All unnecessary thoughts were obliterated by his will, leaving only two.

Kill your enemy.

Prevent the enemy from killing you.

Using this clarity, he entered the state of flow. His perception expanded, absorbing every detail and aspect of what was happening in the dark tunnel. His thinking accelerated, turning the mayhem that surrounded them into a stark and streamlined pattern of cause and effect.

Connected to the underlying law of it all, Sunny was able to react to the actions of his enemies faster and predict them better.

...Sssshimmm!

With a hissing sound, the Midnight Shard cut the air and slashed the next monster across the chest, splitting the skeleton diagonally in two. Without paying the defeated creature any attention, Sunny instantly lunged at the next one.

His movements were fluid and unpredictable, but also grounded and firm. Every strike, every step was calculated and efficient, focused on delivering the maximum amount of damage while preserving as much of his strength as possible. It was a perfect combination of the two seemingly contradictory battle styles that he had learned.

Just like that, Sunny danced between the countless undead monsters, his sword cutting one after another down. The Midnight Shard wasn't unimaginably sharp like Caster's jian, nor filled with annihilating white flame like Neph's radiant longsword. However, it refused to give in and remained unbroken. No matter how many tough bones the tachi cut, not a single dent appeared on its blade.

With blood streaming down his body and sweat biting his eyes, his muscles on the verge of breaking apart and his lungs desperately burning for air, Sunny somehow kept up this mad tempo and fought, fought, fought.

At some point, he heard a furious roar from somewhere ahead and briefly looked up, noticing that Effie had dismissed her battered round shield and finally summoned the beautiful bronze spear. With it in her hands, the huntress became even more deadly. Multiple skeletons burst into a shower of broken bones, cut apart by a wide arc of the ancient weapon.

However, at the same time, more and more wounds started accumulating on Effie's body.

...Despite everything, things weren't going well for the cohort.

Or at least, it seemed that way for a while.

At some point, however, Sunny noticed that the number of skeletons attacking the cohort from the front had begun to diminish. Pretty soon, Nephis, Effie and Caster were getting a few moments to catch their breaths from time to time. The pressure on himself had also lessened.

□a□da □o□□l The Stone Saint, on the other hand, had to hold off an ever-increasing number of undead creatures attacking the party from the rear. When the balance of the rolling battle noticeably shifted, Changing Star gave a command to change the formation of the cohort.

She quickly dashed back to reinforce the taciturn Shadow, while Sunny moved forward to support Caster and Effie at the head of the group.

Once he got there, the huntress gave him a tired smile.

"Hey, doofus. You... look like shit."

Sunny glanced down and had to agree with her. With his armor torn in a dozen places and soaked through and through with blood, he looked pretty much exactly as dead as the Nightmare Creatures they were fighting.

However, Effie's state wasn't any better.

He smiled crookedly.

"Thanks. You're quite a looker yourself, you know."

The huntress scoffed and then turned away to face another of the undead abominations.

"Hold fast! We're almost there!"

She told the truth.

After several more minutes of furious fighting, the tunnel they were moving through suddenly opened into a large cavern. A few meters in front of them, the floor of the catacombs was broken, collapsing into a vast, seemingly bottomless chasm. That terrifying abyss was filled with darkness that even Sunny's sight couldn't pierce.

The chasm was no less than forty meters across and stretched far into the distance to both left and right, like a dark border separating the world of the living from the world of the dead. A rickety rope bridge was drawn across it, connecting to a similar-looking tunnel at the other end of the abyssal chasm.

The rope bridge looked like a derelict of ancient times. It was flimsy, slippery, and rotten through and through.

'She doesn't expect us to actually use it, does she? It's so obvious that this thing will collapse as soon as we step on it! Has she not seen any sageuk?! Even if others somehow survive, there's no chance that I, with that damn [Fated] Attribute, will make it to the other end...'

Sunny turned to Effie and scowled, really hoping to be surprised by her answer.

"So, what now?"

The huntress looked at him in confusion.

"What else? We cross the bridge!"

Chapter 198: Last Stand | Shadow Slave

Sunny sighed.

Of course, they had to cross the bridge. Why had he even bothered to ask?

'Great!'

At least the damn thing was empty of the skeletons. The path to the other side of the chasm was clear.

'What is clear is that I'm going to die!'

While Sunny was consumed by these unhappy ruminations, Effie and Caster quickly threw the few undead creatures remaining in front of them over the edge of the chasm. Finally safe from their constant attacks, most of the cohort took a chance to quickly catch their breaths.

Only Nephis and the Stone Saint were still fighting. In fact, the overwhelming pressure of the pursuing horde had grown so heavy that they were barely holding on.

Two figures — one shrouded in shadows, the other bathed in pure white light — were slowly buckling under the furious onslaught of the army of the dead.

Sunny gritted his teeth.

...If nothing changed, they were going to be the ones being thrown into the dark abyss very soon.

With a grim expression on his face, he glanced at Effie and said:

"Go."

Leaning on her spear, the huntress weakly shook her head.

"Someone will have to hold them off long enough for everyone to get to the other side. You should..."

Sunny interrupted her.

"I'll be the last one to cross. Don't worry... I have a plan."

A crazy plan. But what else was new?

Giving him a long look, Effie hesitated for a few seconds, then nodded.

"Alright. Stay alive, Sunny."

He quietly chuckled.

"Aww. I didn't know you cared."

She stared at him for a bit, and then calmly said:

"No, it's just that if you die, pretty soon I'll have to fight your scrawny corpse. So... don't do that. Okay?"

With that, Effie beckoned others to follow her and stepped on the rickety bridge.

Sunny blinked a couple of times, watched her go, then turned his back to the chasm and sighed.

'Right. What else did I expect?'

In any case, there was no way back now.

Brandishing the Midnight Shard, he dashed forward and joined Changing star and the Shadow Saint in their desperate fight.

Dispatching a couple of skeletons, Sunny briefly turned to Nephis and said:

"Retreat to the bridge. Saint and I will hold them off!"

□a□da □o□□l Her eyes shone with white flames through the visor of the Starlight Legion Armor's helmet. A moment later, he heard a hoarse voice:

"Are you sure?"

He dodged the claws of an especially menacing monster, bashed it away with the pommel of the tachi, and yelled:

"Yes! But..."

Another undead creature fell to the Midnight Shard.

"...when you get to the other side, you need to destroy the supports of the bridge. Do you understand?"

Changing Star hesitated, almost missing the timing of her attack. Then, she asked:

"What about you?"

Sunny laughed.

"Don't worry about it. I have a way to get across!"

Neph didn't answer for a while. Finally, she simply said:

"Alright."

Not one to waste words, Changing Star didn't say anything else. When the opportunity presented itself, she silently retreated, letting Sunny take her place.

'Now... for the hardest part...'

With Nephis gone, all the monsters of the catacombs descended upon the Stone Saint and him. Sunny cursed, feeling that the tiniest mistake would spell his doom.

The onslaught of the undead horde was beyond anything he had expected. Desperately trying not to drown in the torrent of ferocious abominations, Sunny fought with everything he had left.

'Damn... it... all! How the hell was she able to hold this position for so long?!

Not prone to heroic displays, Sunny used the Shadow as a meat shield... stone shield?... and hid behind her from time to time, emerging from the cover of the taciturn monster only to deliver a strike or two and disappear again. The two of them worked beautifully together, almost as if sharing one mind.

Well, what else did he expect? She was his Shadow, after all. And his shadow was currently wrapped around her stone body.

The armor of the menacing knight was still mostly intact. However, even it was battered and broken in several places. With a dark expression on his face, Sunny noticed a stream of ruby dust pouring from one of the breaches.

The Stone Saint was wounded.

'This needs to end fast...'

Feeling his own endurance running out, Sunny wanted nothing more than to fall to the ground and rest, even if it meant dying. But instead, he doubled the intensity of his attacks. There was no need to hold anything back and preserve his strength anymore. He just had to last for a bit more... a dozen seconds, at most...

But even a dozen seconds seemed like an impossible dream.

Impossible... he knew someone who was in the habit of making impossible things happen...

With a furious growl, Sunny cut another skeleton apart, received a glancing blow to his already wounded side, and stumbled back. The Shadow appeared in front of him, enduring a rain of attacks with the help of her

already battered shield. Her feet slid on the stones, but the taciturn knight stubbornly held.

'Goddamit! When?!' *This chapter is updated by [. c o m]*

As if answering his silent cry, and loud rattle followed by a thunderous boom informed him that the bridge had been brought down.

Now, there was nothing connecting the two sides of the terrifying chasm. Sunny was left alone against the horde of immortal monsters, with no way to retreat.

'Finally.'

Turning his back to the undead creatures, Sunny peered into the darkness. Seeing the cohort waiting for him on the other side of the dark abyss, he lingered for a moment, sighed, and ran to its edge.

The shadow slipped from the body of the Stone Saint and wrapped itself around his own. Suddenly weakened, the taciturn monster held the entire horde back by herself for a split second, and then dissolved into darkness, returning to the tranquil expanse of the Soul Sea.

With no obstacles to slow them down anymore, the flood of skeletons lunged forward. They were just a meter or two behind Sunny, stretching their deadly claws to tear him apart.

'Too close!'

Approaching the abyssal chasm, Sunny briefly glanced into the impenetrable darkness that filled it...

...And, without pausing even for a second, jumped off the edge.

Chapter 199: Cliffhanger | Shadow Slave

'Crap!'

Jumping into the bottomless dark abyss, Sunny briefly regretted every decision he had ever made in his life.

How did he end up in this situation? Where did he go wrong?

However, there was no time for self-reflection. He wasn't ready to see his whole life flash before his eyes yet.

There were more pressing matters.

Before the momentum of his jump waned, Sunny summoned the Prowling Thorn. By the time the triangular dagger materialized in his hand, he was already beginning to fall. Not wasting any time, Sunny threw it with as much power as he could while simultaneously sending the shadow from his hand onto the blade of the kunai.

The throwing dagger flashed in the darkness of the underground cavern, streaked the wide chasm, and embedded itself into the hard rock on the other side of it. Because of the enhancement of the shadow, it got deeply lodged in the stone.

'Yes!'

A moment later, the invisible string connecting the Prowling Thorn to Sunny's wrist drew tight. Instantly, his hand was violently jerked forward. Holding on for his dear life, Sunny swung through the darkness with incredible speed. Behind him, dozens of skeletons plummeted into the chasm, with more being pushed down with each second.

However, he was already far away.

'Ha! Bite it, you bastards!'

A couple of seconds later, all humor was smashed out of him by the hard impact against the opposite wall of the crevice. Sunny tried to soften the blow a little, but it still hurt like crazy. His bones groaned, on the verge of breaking apart.

A couple of them probably did.

Sunny blacked out for a moment or two. When he came back to his senses, his wrist was in agony, with the invisible string of the Prowling Thorn slowly cutting deep into its skin. Hissing, Sunny gripped the thin string with his other hand and relieved a part of the pressure.

Then, he looked up.

Ten or so meters above him, five pale faces hovered above the edge of the cliff. On them were written expressions of horror, shock, and astonishment.

'Oh. Right. I guess they don't know about this Memory of mine.'

To the cohort, his desperate trick must have looked like... simple suicide. From the perspective of people who didn't know about the secret enchantment of the Prowling Thorn, Sunny just took a running start and jumped into the abyss, only to disappear into its darkness without a trace.

It was as though he had chosen to sacrifice his life to give the others a chance to escape. Like some sort of a stupid hero would.

'Do they even know me? Like I'd ever do something like that...'

Swinging on the invisible string, Sunny strained his aching chest and yelled:

"Hey, idiots! I'm down here!"

Slowly, four of the five faces turned to look straight down. Their expressions were rather comical.

Cassie simply tilted her head.

...But her expression was priceless as well.

Grinning, Sunny began to climb up. Since the string of the Prowling Thorn could change its length at will, he commanded it to shorten and rode comfortably all the way up, stepping lightly on the vertical wall of the chasm from time to time to make the process faster.

Soon, he climbed over the edge of the cliff and sprawled on the cold ground, breathing heavily.

The rest of the cohort just stared at him.

"...What?"

Effie was the first to speak:

"Uh... glad you're alive, Sunny. But also... what the hell? How did you do that?"

He simply threw her the kunai. Once the huntress bent down to pick it up, Sunny pulled on the invisible string and made the dagger fly back into his hand.

"Oh, that? That was a piece of cake. Nothing that a knife and a piece of string can't solve... more or less."

He decided to omit the fact that he had almost soiled his pants in the few short moments between jumping off the edge of the chasm and successfully embedding the Prowling Thorn into the rocks on the other side of it.

Effie blinked a couple of times, then slowly straightened herself up.

"...Cool Memory. Where did you get it?"

Sunny dismissed the kunai and tiredly waved his hand.

"You know those porcupine monsters back in the city? I got it off one of those."

With that, the others left him alone. They were all hurt and dead tired, too. Everyone needed to rest and patch up their wounds.

Nephis made a move to try and heal them, but was stopped by Effie. The huntress darkly shook her head.

"Not yet. There's one last hurdle to overcome. We'll need you to be at the top of your game."

Changing Star glanced at her, lingered for a few moments, but then sat back down. Out here, the word of the pathfinder was the law. If Effie said that Nephis needed to save her strength, then she had to obey.

Sunny was too exhausted to care. He knew that he was not going to bleed out thanks to the Blood Weave, and that was enough for now.

He just wanted to rest.

Some time later, he heard a shuffling sound and looked up to see Kai sitting down near him. The charming archer looked way too pretty and put together for a person who had just lived through the same mayhem as them, but Sunny was starting to suspect that this infuriating trait was just something he would have to come to terms with.

Maybe Kai had some weird Attribute that made him look good no matter the circumstance.

Looking at the beautiful young man, Sunny sighed and said:

"Hey, Night. How are you doing?"

Kai scratched the back of his head and answered:

"Ah... alright, I guess. That was intense back there, huh?"

Sunny nodded.

"Yeah. So... what's up?"

The charming archer hesitated for a bit.

"Nothing, really. I just wanted to say three things to you."

'What a strange guy.'

"Oh? Alright, go on."

Kai looked at him thoughtfully and said:

"Well, first of all, I now fully understand what you meant when you said that you are crazy. Because that jump of yours... that was really crazy!"

Sunny chuckled.

"I guess so. I'm alive, though, aren't I?"

The archer gave him a nod and smiled.

"Another thing I wanted to say is that I also understood how you managed to survive all those months in the ruins. Your swordsmanship... I've never seen anything like it. I think that very few people in the Dark City would survive a clash against you. So, everything makes more sense now."

Sunny didn't know how to feel about that praise. On one hand, it was nice to be acknowledged for something he worked so hard on. On the other hand, he still preferred being considered a cowardly weakling.

It made killing fools far easier.

He shrugged.

"Thanks, I guess. What is the third thing?"

Kai was silent for a long time, as though trying to find the right words. Finally, he shook his head and cautiously said:

"Right. About that jump of yours... you do remember that I can fly, right? So I could have carried you over the chasm, no problem. So, uh... why did

you do it?"

Sunny stared at him silently for a while, an inexorable expression on his face.

'...Goddamit.'

To be honest, in the chaos of it all, he did forget about this crucial detail.

After a long stretch of awkward silence, Sunny opened his mouth and said in a flat tone:

"Oh, you know. It just seemed like a good idea at the moment."

Kai blinked and gave him a strange look.

"A... a good idea?"

Sunny cleared his throat, then glared at the charming young man.

"It worked, didn't it? So... let's not talk about it again... ever. Okay?"

Chapter 200: Descent | Shadow Slave

After a while, Sunny regained enough of his senses to warily look around.

The tunnel they were currently in was somewhat different from those they had traversed while fighting the horde of undead monsters. It looked more weathered and decrepit, with its walls and floor smoothed and uneven, as though eroded by something over the course of countless years.

What's worse, it was... wet. With a cold shiver, Sunny realized that they were surrounded by puddles of black water.

The smell of sea salt permeated the air.

Looking up, he found the tall figure of the boisterous huntress and asked in a raspy voice:

"Where are we?"

Effie glanced at him and gestured up.

"A hundred meters or so below the surface, pretty much exactly under the city wall."

He stared at her blankly, slowly comprehending the meaning of these words. The huntress gave him a nod.

"Yeah, you guessed correctly. Come night, this place is going to be full of seawater. That chasm behind us is what prevents the catacombs from being flooded by the dark sea."

She sighed tiredly.

"So, unless we want to drown or be eaten by some depth dweller, we need to get out of here as soon as possible."

Sunny closed his eyes, imagining a roaring torrent of black water erupting from the mouths of countless tunnels and falling into the abyssal chasm like waterfalls made of pure darkness.

Yeah, if they were still underground when that happened, sea monsters would be the least of their problems. The sea itself would kill them.

Luckily, the day was still young.

Effie's words served as a signal. A few moments later, Nephis rose to her feet and glanced at the members of the cohort. Her pale face was calm and composed.

"Time to go. Gather your strength."

With sighs and groans of pain, everyone stood up. Sunny was the last one to follow suit.

'Ouch, that hurts. I'm really starting to wonder if fighting Harus was a better choice.'

But no, it wasn't. Terrible as it might have been, the battle with the skeletons was at least predictable. The damned hunchback, on the other hand, was a complete unknown.

There was nothing worse than facing an enemy that you knew nothing about.

As the cohort headed deeper into the tunnel, Sunny caught up with Effie and asked with a hint of idle curiosity in his voice:

"By the way, how do you even know your way around the catacombs?"

It wasn't like she could have leisurely explored these deadly tunnels alone.

The huntress gave him a dubious look and shrugged.

"This knowledge is sort of passed down between the outer settlement hunters. I've been here a couple of times before, trying to escape from

especially terrible Nightmare Creatures. Although, to be honest, I only descended this deep into the catacombs once."

Effie shivered.

"I was new in the Dark City at that time. Back then, the strongest hunter in the outer settlement sort of took me under her wing. We went down here with an entire party."

Sunny scratched the back of his head and grimaced when his battered body protested against the sudden movement.

"Yeah? That party must have been very strong, to return from this place alive."

The huntress glanced at him and smiled darkly.

"...Who said anything about returning alive? Actually, they all died. I was the only one to survive."

Sunny stared at her for a long time, and then asked:

"If they all died, then why the hell did you bring us here?"

Effie shrugged.

"Because no matter how strong that party was, they weren't even close to this one. Do you even realize how powerful the six of us are, all put together? Goddamn. I wouldn't want to be our enemy."

Then, she hesitated for a few moments and added:

"Plus, this time, I know what we're going to face. We'll get out of here in one piece, trust me."

Sunny wasn't a particularly trusting person, but at this point, he didn't really have a choice. Leaving the tall huntress alone, he walked in silence for a while.

The tunnels were now strongly angled down. With each minute, the cohort was descending deeper and deeper underground.

Slowly, his curiosity awakened. Now that the harrowing battle against the army of the dead was behind them, Sunny began to wonder about something peculiar.

Where exactly did all those human skeletons come from?

There were hundreds, if not thousands of them down here in the catacombs. Even if every hunter that had ever lived in the outer settlement died in these tunnels, their number wouldn't account for that much.

Not to mention that people who perished in the Dark City tended to end up eaten by some terrible monster, their bones pulverized into dust by its teeth.

His pointless pondering was interrupted by Effie, who suddenly gestured for the cohort to stop.

After discussing something with Nephis, she gave her a nod and turned to the rest of them:

"Listen up. We're close to the central chamber of this maze. The exit to the surface is right ahead. However, getting to it won't be easy."

The tall huntress hesitated, and then said:

"If we want to make it outside, we will have to act fast. There's a big fat bastard of a Nightmare Creature that lives in that chamber. However, it takes time for it to fully wake up. So... don't stop to look at it, don't panic, don't lose your cool. It might look scary, but if you follow Neph and do what she tells you to do, you should be alright."

She waited for a bit to make sure that everyone understood her meaning, and then grinned.

"Alright. If everyone is ready, let's go meet the Lord of the Dead."

'Wha... Lord of the Dead?'

Not liking the sound of this name one bit, Sunny summoned the Midnight Shard and reluctantly followed after Effie.

...Soon, they entered a giant underground chamber.

Once Sunny saw what was inside of it, his eyes grew wide.

He finally understood where all those skeletal wraiths came from.

He also understood where the inhabitants of the ancient city had disappeared to.

...They were all here.

Chapter 201: Lord Of The Dead

The giant underground chamber was circular in shape and as immense as the grand hall of the Bright Castle. Its walls were built out of the same grey stone slabs as the mighty walls of the Dark City, but unlike them, the walls of the chamber were covered with whispering streams of cold, nebulous black water.

In the center of it, a vast mountain of human bones rose from the ground, reaching almost halfway to the distant ceiling. Thousands... no, hundreds of thousands of people must have perished to create it.

With a harrowing realization, Sunny finally understood where the people who built the ancient city and the impregnable wall surrounding it had disappeared to.

They were all here, piled onto each other in this vile monument of death. This horrid dark chamber was their final resting place.

An old memory suddenly surfaced in his mind.

Back beneath the branches of the Soul Tree, Cassie had seen a vision of a bloodsoaked hill formed from countless corpses. On top of it, a tiny black seed was floating in a pool of blood.

Was there a similar mountain of bones hiding under the soil of the Ashen Barrow? Was that how the Soul Devourer had been born?

Sunny shifted his gaze, only now noticing the veins of crimson coral growing from the harrowing hill of white bones, almost like muscle tissue of some colossal creature. Following the coral pillars up, he finally saw that the dome of the immense chamber was broken, with pale sunlight streaming through the breach and falling on the ghastly visage below.

A giant stone hand was reaching down through the broken dome, its palm open, as though trying to caress the mountain formed from the bones of those people who had once populated this dark, forsaken land.

Looking at the stone hand, Sunny suddenly realized where they were.

The vast underground chamber was situated directly underneath the headless statue of the graceful woman who had once saved them from drowning in the black waters of the cursed sea.

One of her hands was raised toward the heavens, as if trying to embrace them. The other had broken off and fell down thousands of years ago, lying in the mud at the base of the giant statue.

...Reaching into the depths of hell, that was the hand Sunny was looking at right now.

It was also their way out of here.

"Doofus! Wake up!"

Brought back to reality by Effie's yell, he shuddered and looked around with a new understanding.

So the exit the huntress had told them about was the breach in the dome of the underground chamber. With Kai's Aspect Ability and the help of the golden rope, escaping through it was not going to be a problem.

But... where was this Lord of the Dead that she had mentioned? From Effie's colorful description, Sunny had expected to see a giant monster slumbering in the heart of the catacombs.

If memory served, her exact words were "a big fat bastard of a Nightmare Creature".

But he couldn't see anything.

Unless...

His eyes narrowed.

And just at that moment, the mountain of bones suddenly moved.

When the mountain moved, everything suddenly made sense.

At first, Sunny thought that the unknown creature was sleeping inside the ghastly hill of bones. But then he realized that no, it wasn't.

The mountain itself was the Nightmare Creature.

This was the Lord of the Dead.

Each of the countless bones piled on top of each other in the underground chamber was a part of its body.

For a moment, Sunny was paralyzed by fear.

'Fat bastard?! That is what you call a fat bastard?!'

But then, the disparate pieces of information clicked in his mind, assembling into a vivid chain of cause and effect.

'Of course. Why didn't I realize sooner?'

The mountain of bones, the horde of immortal skeletons, the Lord of the Dead... it all connected.

The Nightmare Creature in front of him was a Fallen Tyrant.

Tyrants were a fifth step in the evolution of Nightmare Creatures, and the name of that class was not coincidental. The fifth step represented rule and authority.

That's why the blind monstrosity he had faced on the slopes of the Black Mountain was named a King, and that's why the abomination in front of him was named a Lord.

Classes differed from each other in terms of pure might, but most of the distinction between them was caused by a more fundamental reason. Higher

classes possessed characteristics that, while not directly affecting the quantity of their power, gave it a qualitative change.

For example, while beasts were mindless, demons and those above them were intelligent. That's why a demon, even if it was only slightly stronger than a monster, was in fact ten times more dangerous.

The characteristic of the Tyrant class was that these Nightmare Creatures were capable of creating and controlling large amounts of lesser creatures. The Mountain King's Larva that Sunny had slain during his first trial, which was born when a tiny worm living inside the Mountain King's body entered the corpse of a dying slave, was one such lesser creature.

However, this power had its limitations. The minions created by a tyrant couldn't be of the same rank as it. That's why the Larva was a dormant beast, while Mountain King itself was Awakened.

Similarly, while the skeletons that the cohort had faced were Awakened, they had to be created by a Fallen Tyrant.

...And something told Sunny that their immortality was tied to the Lord of the Dead, too. If someone wanted to destroy the undead army, they would have to destroy the abominable bone colossus first.

Said colossus, meanwhile, was slowly waking up right in front of Sunny. And if when it did...

'Damnation!'

Nervously gripping the Midnight Shard, he glanced at Nephis.

The golden rope was already in her hands, and she was passing it to Kai.

Before the beautiful archer could take it, though, the mountainous creature suddenly rippled.

A moment later, a twisted pillar of bones shot from its body, flying in their direction with the force of a siege ram...

Chapter 202: Risk And Reward

Nephis and Kai dove away, and the massive pillar of bone shot past them. Before the thunderous sound of it crashing against the wall of the chamber even reached Sunny's ears, the pillar was already moving, whipping sideways with tremendous force.

Luckily, he and Cassie were behind it... but Effie and Caster were not. Both of them reacted with admirable speed and fell to the ground, allowing the terrifying limb of the gargantuan creature to fly above their heads.

Rising from the stone floor, the huntress screamed:

"It's just thrashing in its sleep! Move! We need to get out of here before the bastard wakes up!"

Cursing, Sunny dismissed the Midnight Shard and faced the mountain of bones, trying to predict its next move. He was beginning to understand how Effie's original hunting party had perished in the catacombs.

pan da-novel,co m

A sword wouldn't be of any use in this situation.

The Lord of the Dead was slowly coming to its senses. The bones constituting its repulsive body moved and rippled, unfurling from within the white mass like giant, twisting limbs. It seemed to be slowly turning from a shapeless hill into some semblance of a creature.

What shape that creature would assume once it fully awoke, Sunny didn't want to know.

Another twisting pillar... limb?... suddenly shot from the mass of bones, blindly striking at the empty space behind the giant abomination. Sunny gritted his teeth, his ears ringing from the thunderclap of its impact against the wall. What followed was a deafening noise of thousands of ancient bones scraping against weathered stone.

P anda-novel,c.om

The massive pillar whipped left and right, then fell to the ground and slowly retreated back inside the body of the Lord of the Dead.

Meanwhile, Nephis was back at her feet. Dashing toward Kai, she pushed one end of the golden rope into his hands and pointed to the breach in the dome of the chamber. In the next moment, the archer soared into the air, flying to his destination with incredible speed.

With a terrifying scraping sound, the whole white mountain rippled once again, and several devastating pillars of bone shot to intercept him.

However, Sunny had no time to check on Kai.

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Because the Lord of the Dead had extended two more limbs in his direction.

Diving under the first one, Sunny felt a wave of fetid air rush past him. Knowing that he only had a second left to live, he then strained his muscles and jumped with all his shadow-augmented might. Sunny's body flew several meters into the air, avoiding the rushing bone tentacle only by a few centimeters.

Landing in a roll, Sunny cursed and got back to his feet.

'What kind of an infernal jumping rope game is this?!'

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The Lord of the Dead was slowly coming to its sense. More bone tentacles appeared from the mass of corpses, each moving with growing precision.

But Kai was already standing on the palm of the giant stone hand, the golden rope looped around one of its fingers.

Cassie was the first one to climb up. With the flying rapier loyally hovering over her shoulder, the blind girl effortlessly moved up the rope, reaching the

distant ceiling of the underground chamber less than ten seconds later. It was easy to forget that she had absorbed as much soul essence as the rest of them. Her delicate arms hid much more power than one would assume.

...However, back on the ground, those seconds were a real hell. The mountainous creature was waking up, making it hard for the rest of them to stay away from its blindly thrashing limbs.

P A N D A N O V E L

They needed to get out of here fast.

Effie was the next one to take the rope. The huntress practically flew up, pushing herself with agility and herculean strength worthy of an ancient hero.

Then, it was Caster's turn. Effortlessly dodging a pillar of bone with his incredible speed, the Legacy grabbed the rope... and turned into a barely visible blur. A second later, he was already landing on the giant stone palm.

Nephis and Sunny were the only ones left in the reach of the Fallen Tyrant. Glancing at Sunny, Changing Star yelled:

"Your turn!"

...However, Sunny did not respond.

His eyes were fixed on the base of the gargantuan abomination, where, amidst the ancient bones...

A weak golden glow emanated from a small, partially concealed object.

Sunny lingered for a moment, his thoughts moving with incredible speed. He knew that he was a greedy person by nature, and one cursed with insatiable curiosity, too. However, first a foremost, he was someone who put a tremendous amount of value on his own survival.

That's why, right now, his reasoning was cold and sober.

It was a question of risk and reward, as well as his ability.

Would he be able to reach the object shining with the light of divinity and come back alive, or not?

A second later, he looked at Nephis and answered:

"You go. I'll be just behind you."

...It would be a shame to go through all of this and not receive anything in return. He had to try.

With that, Sunny turned around and dashed toward the Lord of the Dead.

The decision was made, and now all that was left was to execute it.

Summoning the Prowling Thorn, he threw it at the mountain of bones. Of course, Sunny didn't hope to wound the tyrant. He just wanted to lodge the kunai in its body.

Just as the throwing dagger pierced the mass of bones, a white limb suddenly shot in his direction, obstructing everything with its repulsive expanse. Commanding the invisible string to contract, Sunny jumped high into the air and flew forward as though launched from a cannon.

Landing on the other side of the pillar, just a few steps away from the unencompassable mass of bones, he gritted his teeth...

□a□da □o□□l And then thrust his hand inside the Fallen Tyrant's body.

A moment later, his fist closed around the concealed object, and with some effort, Sunny pulled it out in the clatter of breaking bones. A sharp pain pierced his forearm.

Opening his fist, he saw... a small, intricate iron key. It looked almost ordinary, if not for the ethereal golden glow emanating from within it.

In the next moment, Sunny suddenly staggered, feeling a wave of weakness washed over his body.

Rotating his forearm, he stared blankly at it for a split second, trying to comprehend what he was seeing.

And when he did, his eyes widened in terror.

Chapter 203: Corpse Eater | Shadow Slave

Glistening in the dim twilight of the underground chamber, an enormous leech was attached to his forearm. The creature was about a meter long, its slimy skin slightly translucent and red as dried blood.

It was indescribably repulsive.

...What's worse, though, was that its sucker had effortlessly broken through the leather vambrace of the Puppeteer's Shroud and sunk deep into Sunny's arm, splitting open his skin and muscles.

Currently, the leech was gorging on his blood, its belly slowly ballooning as crimson fluid rushed into it with frightening speed.

'Ah... ah... aaaah!'

With a sense of disgust and horror, Sunny slammed his fist into the spongy flesh of the revolting monster. Augmented with the power of shadows, his punch was powerful enough to easily break a human skull.

The abhorrent slug, however, did not even react to it. It just continued sucking out his blood. All Sunny achieved was sending a wave of pain rolling through his body.

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'Not good...'

Instantly summoning the Midnight Shard, he enhanced its edge with the help of the shadow and hacked at the leech, putting all his strength behind the strike. The blade of the tachi was as sharp as a razor, and with the augmentation provided by shadow, it...

...Slid helplessly off the leech's skin, not leaving even a scratch on it. The slug wasn't affected at all. It was still drinking his blood, consuming a dangerous amount of it with each second.

Sunny stared at the disgusting creature, dumbfounded. His body was already starting to suffer from blood loss, a sickening weakness slowly spreading through it. There wasn't much time left until it would cause him to lose consciousness.

And then, inevitably, die.

'Think, think...'

P anda-novel,c.om

The leech had broken through his tier-five awakened armor without any effort. It was immune to the damage done by the Midnight Shard, which had never failed to cut down any monster he faced before. This could only mean one thing.

The damn slug was a Fallen Beast.

Sunny blinked in disbelief.

'That thing is a Fallen One? Are you kidding me?'

If this was true, then nothing he could do would harm the leech. Maybe if he was at the very peak of his rank, there would be a chance. But with his core mostly empty and his Aspect Ability focused on versatility as opposed to pure might, like Effie's, there was none.

The gap between their ranks was just too wide.

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...Stone Saint could probably wound it. But it would take several seconds for the taciturn monster to appear and take action. Seconds that Sunny didn't have. By the time she was able to do anything, he would already be dead, either sucked dry by the abominable slug or crushed to death by the Lord of the Dead.

That left Sunny with only one option. If he couldn't get rid of the leech...

He was going to have to cut off his arm.

□a□da □o□□l Maybe Nephis would be able to grow him a new one.

Or not. In any case, he had to do it in order to survive...

Raising the tachi over his head, Sunny gritted his teeth and hesitated for a moment. Despite understanding that this was the only way, he was still struggling with the idea of crippling himself so terribly.

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'Don't think! If you want to live, just do it!'

With a desperate resolve, he forcefully brought the Midnight Shard down... but then stopped it at the last second. The sharp blade hovered mere centimeters away from his skin.

This was not due to the lack of determination, but because Sunny noticed a subtle change happening to the leech.

Its belly, which had been expanding rapidly as his blood filled it, stopped ballooning at some point. Now, strange spasms were running through it.

'What the...'

In the next moment, the vile creature suddenly convulsed. Letting go of his arm, it dropped to the ground and writhed in agony. Through the translucent film of its skin, Sunny could see the innards of the giant slug bursting open. It was as though it was being torn from within by some invisible force.

PANDA NOVEL

No, not a force... it was being killed by his blood. The damn leech got poisoned by it.

...It seemed that Blood Weave was far more odd and tenacious of an Attribute than he had thought.

A second later, the whole body of the Fallen Beast simply ruptured, spilling blood everywhere. Sunny stared at it with a blank expression.

Bringing him out of the daze, the voice of the Spell whispered:

[You have slain a Fallen Beast, Corpse Eater.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

'Huh.'

[You have received a Memory.]

As his eyes grew wide, Sunny shook off his astonishment and lunged forward. He still had to escape from this damn place.

Grabbing the bloodied soul shard from the eviscerated remains of the abominable leech, he turned around and sprinted to the golden rope.

Dodging a bone tentacle that burst from the body of the gargantuan tyrant to pursue him, Sunny rolled on the ground, jumped over a pile of broken bones, and finally reached his destination.

As soon as he grabbed the rope, it began contracting, bringing him out of the underground chamber.

When Sunny was nearly reaching the hand of the stone goddess, a deafening roar thundered from below, washing over his body in an almost palpable wave.

The Lord of the Dead was finally awake.

But it was already too late. His prey had escaped.

Climbing out of the mud, Sunny fell to his knees, and then tiredly lowered himself to the ground. The breath was escaping from his lungs with laborious, raspy sounds.

Weak. He felt so weak. And tired.

But it was so good to see the sun again...

The wounds he had received in the catacombs had finally caught up with Sunny. With adrenaline gone, he was now in a sea of pain. A quiet groan escaped from his lips.

'That... that was not fun.'

While Sunny was contemplating this, a shadow fell over him. Looking up, he saw Nephis glaring at him with a dark expression. She was bloodied and battered, with a deep frown contorting the graceful lines of her usually calm face.

"...What?"

Kneeling beside Sunny, Changing Star grimaced and said:

"Are you insane? Why did you do that?"

He tried to chuckle, but ended up twisting in an excruciating coughing fit. When Sunny was finally able to breathe again, he said weakly:

"Yes, no? Maybe. I don't know. I just... saw something shiny."

With that, he opened his fist and showed Changing Star the glowing crystal of the ascended soul shard he had scavenged from the corpse of the vile blood-sucking leech.

She stared at it for a few moments, and then sighed.

Without saying anything else, Nephis placed her cool hands on his chest and closed her eyes.

A moment later, the purifying white flame spread through his body like a warm embrace, repairing any damage done to it.

Even knowing how much pain this cost her, Sunny couldn't help but be happy to feel its touch again.

Soon, his pain disappeared.

With his head cleared of the fog, he realized that they had done it.

They had successfully escaped the Dark City.

Who knew it would be so hard?

Chapter 204: Mysterious Key | Shadow Slave

A while later, they were resting in the shadow of the giant statue. Every member of the cohort looked nothing short of terrible, however, beneath the bloodied clothes and broken armor, their bodies were whole and sound.

Changing Star had healed them all, and now, she was the only one who was weak and exhausted. Using the white flame so much had taken a heavy toll on her.

Sitting in the mud, Sunny raised his head and looked at the giant statue of the faceless woman. She was just like the last time he had seen her, slender and graceful, with her light flowing robe rippling in the wind, as though made out of actual fabric and not hard stone.

The statue was tilted slightly to the side, with its one remaining hand reaching high into the sky. A long time ago, on the night of their harrowing escape from the Ashen Barrow, Sunny, Cassie and Nephis had taken shelter in her palm.

It was from its height that he had first seen the walls of the Dark City.

Looking down, Sunny stared at the other hand of the giant statue, which had broken off a long time ago and fell down, crushing through the dome of the underground chamber. The speed was too fast, and with a swoosh, Wang Xuan was pulled into the whirlpool, like a little crucian carp that had been hooked and was violently pulled out of the water.

With a sigh, he closed his eyes and thought:

'Thank you for saving us again.'

Then, his face darkened.

Remembering the events that had transpired in the catacombs, Sunny felt his good mood evaporating. Although he had found the answer to one of the

mysteries that had been plaguing him for a while now, he wasn't happy about it.

The fate of the inhabitants of the ancient city had always been something that Sunny was very curious about. As an amateur explorer who spent most of his free time studying the ruins of the Dark City, he was familiar with subtle details of their culture more than most. Learning about the mundane facts of their lives was somewhat of a passion of his. If you dare to fish against him like this, no matter if it's a strange thing on a mobile phone or that ferocious giant fish, you'll have to pay the price.

He had known that the history of this ancient civilization ended in tragedy, of course. A cataclysmic disaster had destroyed it, turning the once prosperous land into the desolate hell it was today. But against all logic, Sunny still hoped that these people had somehow managed to survive.

Perhaps they had migrated somewhere, leaving the ruins of their city behind.

But now he knew that it wasn't so. All of them were right there below him, buried forever in a damp underground chamber, piled onto each other high enough to form a ghastly mountain of bones. More than that, their remains had been soaked in the cursed waters of the dark sea and turned into a vessel for the soul of a vile Nightmare Creature.

There were a lot of questions about the fate of these people still lingering in his mind. How did they end up in that dark chamber? Had they died there, or had their bodies been brought there by someone... or something... later? How was the Lord of the Dead born? Was its inception the same as that of the Soul Devourer?

But he didn't really want to know the answers anymore. He felt that learning them would only break his heart. A fish is mocking him!

With a sigh, Sunny decided to distract himself from these depressing thoughts with something uplifting and summoned the runes.

One cluster, in particular, interested him the most.

Shadow Fragments: [322/1000.]

He had received four fragments for killing the Corpse Eater... even though the manner of its death was rather peculiar. Having now killed Nightmare Creatures of the Awakened, Fallen, and Great ranks, Sunny could surmise that his initial theory was right.

The Spell gave him double the fragments for killing enemies of higher ranks, according to the number of soul cores they possessed. An Awakened creature would land him two fragments for each core, a Fallen one four, and a Great one sixteen. Then, it was noisy and motionless, instead of reviving here, it chose to disguise it.

It was easy to guess that killing a dormant creature, which was equal to him in terms of rank, would result in one fragment per core, while killing a corrupted one would result in eight.

Made sense. It was the same as absorbing soul shards, with the difference being that shadow fragments entered his core at the moment of the kill and without making a distinction between Nightmare Creatures and humans.

Looking up, he glanced at the list of his Memories.

Memories: [Silver Bell], [Puppeteer's Shroud], [Midnight Shard], [Ordinary Rock], [Prowling Thorn], [Endless Spring], [Blood Arrow].

The last one was new. Slightly intrigued, Sunny read its description. If one's piece of sword energy can't solve the problem, then take a few more pieces. Wang Xuan is going to kill it.

PAN DAN OVEL Memory: [Blood Arrow].

Memory Rank: Ascended.

Memory Tier: I.

Memory Type: Weapon.

Memory Description: [A debt of blood must be paid in blood.]

Memory Enchantments: [Rain of Blood], [Restitution].

Enchantment Description: [The arrows are created from the wielder's blood, and as such, can rain on the enemies for as long as the archer has any left in their veins.]

Enchantment Description: [If the arrow finds its mark, it will drink the blood of the prey and restore that which had been taken from the archer. If it misses, the archer's blood will be lost forever.]

'Huh. Creepy.'

Since Sunny didn't know how to use a bow, this Memory was useless to him. Which was a real shame, because it was the first Ascended one he had ever received. Memories of that rank were extremely rare on the Forgotten Shore.

He could either feed it to the Stone Saint for a couple of shadow fragments, or...

Sunny glanced at Kai and frowned, lost in thought. While the Blood Arrow was of no use to him, it would be a real boon for the charming archer. With it at his disposal, he wouldn't have to carry a quiver with him, not to mention that each shot he made would be much more devastating.

...As long as Kai didn't miss, of course. If he did miss, he would be sacrificing his blood for nothing.

Transferring the Blood Arrow to Kai would have made the cohort much stronger. But Sunny wasn't sure that he was ready to give up his first and only Ascended Memory. Not for free, at least.

Torn, he dismissed the runes and decided to think about it later.

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In other news, the Blood Weave had revealed a new trait. Turns out, Sunny's blood was poisonous — or rather, damaging to anyone who

ingested it. At least it seemed that way from the manner of Corpse Eater's death. He would have to experiment to find out more later...

Or not. Honestly, Sunny didn't even know how one would go about checking something like that, and wasn't particularly eager to find out.

After dismissing the runes, Sunny finally decided to take a look at the mysterious key. Subtly glancing around, he furtively took it out from beneath the vambrace of the Puppeteer's Shroud, where he had hidden it earlier.

The intricate iron key lay on his palm, glowing with a pale golden light.

The light of divinity.

Sunny had no idea what the key was supposed to open.

He had taken an insane risk and almost died to get it. Was it worth it?

Honestly, he wasn't sure.

But deep down, Sunny felt that it was. For some reason, he sensed that the small iron key would turn out to be extremely important to him.

Chapter 205: Journey To The South

Sadly, the cohort did not get a lot of time to rest. Despite the fact that it wasn't even noon yet, they had a lot of ground to cover before sunset.

The plan they had made at the start of the day was to leave the Dark City from the south by climbing the wall near the grandiose Main Gates and then travel through the Labyrinth to the next safe height, which was about ten kilometers away.

However, due to the fact that they had ended up in the catacombs instead and had to escape through the chamber belonging to the Lord of the Dead, the party was now to the east of the ruins, near the beautiful statue of the faceless woman. Not only did they have to circle around the city now, but there was also less time to reach safety before the flood of darkness devoured the Forgotten Shore once again.

Standing up in a chorus of disappointed groans, the cohort assumed the marching formation and set out south. Walking through the mud of the colossal crater was not easy, but for the time being, they had no other choice... unless they wanted to scale the monumental stone wall and return to the Dark City, of course.

Luckily, with both Sunny's shadow and Kai scouting the way ahead, they didn't have to worry about being ambushed by monsters. So, for the time being, the only thing the party had to struggle with was moving their feet through the wet dirt.

The monotonous silence was broken only by laborious breathing and slurping of mud.

...A while later, the impregnable and seemingly endless grey wall that loomed some distance away and above them slowly twisted, drifting away from the edge of the crater.

They were finally leaving the cursed ruins behind.

Turning around, Sunny looked back and studied the sight of the city that had been his whole world for these past four... almost five months.

Far away, the floor of the gargantuan crater sharply rose, forming a tall slope. On it stood the unassailable wall of polished grey stone, firm and unyielding despite the thousands of years that had passed since the demise of its creators.

P AND A N OVEL From where he stood, Sunny could see the flood of crimson coral swelling at its base, sharp blades powerlessly scraping against the cold stone in hopeless attempts to find purchase. It looked as though the city was being besieged by the land itself.

'If it knew what awaits inside, the Labyrinth would be trying to escape as far as possible from that damned place instead.'

With a sigh, Sunny looked up and noticed a lone human figure standing on the wall, watching them disappear into the distance. That figure was crooked and dark, emanating a cold feeling of foreboding.

A few moments later, it turned away and disappeared from view.

Harus had chosen to return to the Bright Castle.

Trying not to shiver, Sunny lingered for a few seconds, and then hurried to catch up with the group.

They were safe from him, at least...

'For now.'

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Because the crater was too big, the bent of its edge was almost imperceptible. Only by looking far into the distance could one say that it was actually curved. Because of this, the cohort could have continued traveling through the crater for a long time without having to move farther away from the goal of today's journey, which lay to the southwest of their current position.

However, they had to leave the crater and return to the Labyrinth sooner or later — not only to escape the black water, but also because there was nothing to hide behind on this vast muddy plain. If any flying Nightmare Creature decided to attack them from above, the cohort would have no defense against it.

The Labyrinth, while hiding its own fair share of terrifying threats, at least offered some measure of protection.

That's why, at some point, Nephis led the party to the sharp slope of the crater, and the six of them climbed out of it. With the help of Kai and the trusty golden rope, the task wasn't hard at all.

For some time after that, they walked on the ridge separating the crater from the Labyrinth proper, but then, finally, had to turn west and enter the maze of crimson coral.

Sunny couldn't help but sigh once the familiar coral walls surrounded him once again. He didn't miss the first months of his infernal voyage into the Dream Realm at all.

Well... maybe a little. But not because of the damn Labyrinth itself, that's for sure.

The crimson forest was simultaneously the same and vastly different from the region of it that he had traveled through before.

The coral maze itself was pretty much identical to how it had been east of the gargantuan crater. However, the creatures populating it in these parts were vastly different.

There were no members of the carapace legion around, at least not anywhere Sunny could see. Instead, the dominant tribe of Nightmare Creatures in this region seemed to consist of nasty, spider-like critters that had a habit of decorating the walls and passages of the Labyrinth with endless amounts of grey, incredibly sticky cobwebs.

What's worse, their web seemed to be made not out of spider silk, but out of thin metal wires that were as tough as iron and could cut the victim into little pieces if it thrashed too much after getting caught.

Needless to say, getting yourself stuck in these webs was tantamount to a death sentence.

The deeper into the Labyrinth they went, the more of these cobwebs surrounded them. It came to the point where they had to use Cassie's flying rapier to clear the path ahead every few minutes, slowing down the speed of the cohort to a crawl.

During one of these stops, Sunny rubbed his face and thought:

'I just hope that nothing attacks us while we wait.'

Turning to him, the shadow glared for a few moments and then tiredly shook its head. It then placed one palm across its face and looked down, as if defeated.

'...What? What did I say?'

A moment later, several massive spider-like creatures jumped out of the cracks in the coral and attacked them.

Chapter 206: Triumph | Shadow Slave

The spiders were about the size of a human, incredibly fast, and had plates of something that resembled iron covering parts of their repulsive bodies. They looked like armored battle machines created for the sole purpose of slaughtering living things.

They also looked strangely familiar. With a little effort, Sunny realized that these abominations looked a lot like lesser, much smaller versions of the giant Fallen Beasts that had destroyed the original Stone Saint and her kin.

It's just that their size and armor weren't nearly as formidable.

If so...

'I have bad news for you, fools.'

As soon as the spiders attacked, the members of the cohort reacted with the deadly calmness of experienced Dark City hunters. Weapons flashed in the air, severing limbs and piercing through iron as though it was paper. Effie straight up flattened one of the creatures with a devastating strike of her battered shield. The poor beast didn't even have time to understand what a huge mistake it had made.

The others were no less efficient. Sunny himself threw the Prowling Thorn and pulled on the invisible string as soon as it sunk into the flesh of one of the spiders, bringing its jump to an abrupt end and sending it crashing to the ground. Before the beast could stand up, Quiet Dancer streaked through the air and pierced its head clean through.

Just a few short seconds after the spiders had tried to ambush the group of humans, the battle was over. Three dead Nightmare Creatures were sprawled in the mud, while the fourth one ended up pinned to a coral wall with several arrows.

They could have even shaved a second or two if it weren't for the need to look out for the spiderwebs.

Sunny shook his head.

'Disappointing.'

Wait.. why was he disappointed? Great! This was great! Not every victory had to almost cost him his life.

If there was one thing to feel disappointed about, it was that this one was so swift that he had not even gotten the chance to finish any of the enemies himself, thus not receiving any rewards from the Spell. But even then, he would be glad to only fight easy battles like this in the future.

Nephis cleaned the blade of her sword with a piece of cloth, listened to the silence for a few moments to make sure that nothing else was going to attack them, and then gave the cohort a go-ahead to start dressing the monsters down.

Soon, soul shards, strips of meat and other useful parts were cut, cleaned, and put into Effie's enchanted bag. Everything was done with efficient speed and professionalism that could only come from a lot of experience.

Sunny could only shake his head again.

They were able to dispose of the iron spiders with such ease because of two reasons. First, as far as Nightmare Creatures went, these ones were not on the same level as, for example, carapace scavengers. They had a slight advantage in speed, but were not nearly as strong, agile, and ridiculously tough.

If Sunny could guess, he would say that the iron spiders relied heavily on their webs and battlefield advantage to defeat the prey. Because the cohort had destroyed the webs in advance, their main advantage was gone.

The second reason was the cohort itself. They were some of the deadliest humans on the Forgotten Shore. Sunny was sure that at least four of them could kill a Pathfinder of the Host in single combat... if not one of the lieutenants themselves.

They were the best and the brightest the outer settlement could offer, after all. Effie had been right when she said that there had never been such a powerful cohort outside the walls of the Bright Castle before.

All in all, the six of them were more than equipped to handle just three awakened beasts. The Labyrinth was going to really try harder if it wished to see them dead.

Sunny chuckled.

"Just" three awakened beasts... yeah. How crazy did this sound?
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And yet, it was true.

Finishing up with the dead spiders, the cohort indifferently left their eviscerated bodies behind and continued on their way.

After several more minor skirmishes with the iron spiders, they had finally reached their destination. Not too far away from them, colored pink by the evening sun, a magnificent arch of white marble rose high above the sea of crimson coral.

The giant structure was clearly created by the same people who had built the Bright Castle, and made from the same stone. It looked like a much larger sibling of the pristine arch that guarded the entrance to the white road which climbed all the way to the outer settlement.

Only this one was much more weathered, bleak, and damaged. Signs of corrosion and deep cracks covered its surface, with one of its sides being partially collapsed.

Sunny studied the arch and looked at Nephis:

"This is our stop for the night?"

She gave him a simple nod and said after a short pause:

"We need to pick up our pace. The night is close, and we might have to fight to clear the top of it."

Sunny sighed. Fighting again... when would they finally be able to rest? It had been such a long day.

However, he kept his mouth shut. Changing Star was the most tired out of all of them... due to healing all their wounds, no less. And he didn't see her complaining.

So it wasn't his place.

P AND A N OVEL To his left, Effie suddenly cursed and groaned:

"More fighting? Come on! When are we finally going to eat?"

Sunny blinked.

'Well... that works, too, I guess.'

Staring at the huntress, Nephis shook her head and silently walked forward.

Soon, they reached the giant arch. Kai summoned his bow and flew up, only to return a few minutes later and report that no terrible monster was nesting on top of the ancient structure.

With sighs of relief, the members of the cohort climbed the golden rope one after another and were soon standing far above the Labyrinth, silently watching as the flood of black water drowned it in the lightless depths.

As the sun disappeared beyond the horizon, they were left on a rectangular island made out of white marble. All around it, there was nothing but the undulating waves of the dark sea.

Sunny was once again surrounded from all sides by nothing but darkness and black water. He did not like the feeling.

Chapter 207: Beach Episode | Shadow Slave

The night passed with no incidents. In the morning, Sunny was woken up by the sound of the surging waves and opened his eyes to see the sun slowly rising from beyond the horizon.

Rubbing his face, he sat up and looked around, noticing that most of the cohort was still asleep. Only Kai, who had been the last one to stand watch, was awake, sitting on the edge of the arch and admiring the dawn with a dreamy look on his face.

Sunny wanted to call out to him and warn the charming archer not to sit this close to the edge, but then remembered that Kai could fly.

'Yeah. Like I would forget it again!'

Using the opportunity, he dove into the Soul Sea and summoned Stone Saint from the depths of the Shadow Core, where she was sleeping in the embrace of nurturing black flames. Just like before, the Shadow did not appear from a sphere of light like an Echo would, but stepped out from a whirlpool of dark fire.

Then, she stood motionlessly in front of Sunny like an actual statue, seemingly indifferent both to his presence and the wounds covering her body.

P AND A N OVEL Sunny walked around the Stone Saint, studying the extent of damage done to her by the undead horde. The armor of the taciturn knight was battered and broken, pierced in several places by the claws of the countless skeletons she had fought. The ruby dust wasn't flowing from the breaches anymore, but he could see deep gashes on her smooth, grey skin.

'Bastards.'

Who dares to hurt his Shadow?

Shaking his head, Sunny dismissed the Saint, sending her back into the restorative darkness of the Shadow Core.

The damage, while extensive, was not really threatening to her existence. In a couple of days, his pet monster should fully recover.

In fact, she already looked better than she had yesterday.

Leaving the Soul Sea, Sunny inhaled the fresh air, lingered for a few moments, and then turned to Kai:

"Hey, Night. Are you stupid? Don't sit this close to the edge!"

The charming archer looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

"I can fly, remember? If I fall..."

Sunny scoffed.

"I'm not worried about you falling into the cursed sea. I am worried about something dragging you off into it. That'd be terrible, right?"

Quite happy with himself, he grinned and turned away.

'What a nice way to start the day...'

Because everyone needed some time to rest and recuperate, they decided to spend a day on the marble arch and continue their journey tomorrow.

As the result, Sunny was currently staring at the sight that wasn't really funny, but filled him with mirth nevertheless.

Back in the real world, when he had time to consume some entertainment, Sunny had noticed a certain popular trope. In most dramas, webtoons, and cartoons aimed at young boys and teenagers, the heroes would inevitably end up spending a day at the beach during their adventures.

He didn't quite know why such a trope existed, but suspected that it was just an excuse to show the female characters in nothing but revealing swimsuits.

Not that he had anything against it...

In any case, Sunny had never imagined that he was going to end up in such an episode himself one day. panda novel

'This is... simply hilarious!'

Barely holding himself from laughing out loud, Sunny glanced at his companions.

Because everyone's armor and weapons were damaged during the battle in the catacombs, they had to keep these Memories inside the Soul Sea for a bit of time to allow them to restore themselves — just like Stone Saint was currently doing in the depths of his Shadow Core.

As the result, all of them — including Sunny himself — were currently wearing nothing except for some loincloths and, in the case of the girls, makeshift brassieres.

Provided, these crude undergarments weren't really swimsuits, and the marble arch could barely be considered a beach even at night... but still, the situation was funnily similar.

They were all half-naked and relaxing in the middle of a something that someone could call an adventure, so it was close enough.

'Ha!'

He was in a rather good mood.

Everyone was busy doing their thing. There was a fire in the middle of the arch, with roasting meat filling the air with an appetizing aroma. Effie was tending to it.

The tan and lean body of the muscular huntress looked like it was cut from stone, as if she was a sculpture of an ancient goddess come to life. Sunny

tried to count her abs and got distracted halfway through by... uh... not so stonelike parts of her robust figure.

After a couple of seconds of thoughtless bliss, Sunny had to hurriedly look away. The last thing he wanted was...

'Pure thoughts!'

Nephis was helping Effie with the breakfast. Next to the vigorous huntress, her figure seemed especially slender and lithe. However, she was also extremely athletic in appearance. Her ivory skin was pleasantly contrasted against the olive skin of their boisterous pathfinder.

'What a sight to behold...'

Uh... from a purely aesthetic standpoint, of course.

Seeing Changing Star like that reminded Sunny of the early days of their stay in the Dream Realm. Things had been much simpler back then.

Suddenly wistful, he looked away and checked what Cassie was doing. The blind girl was resting near the fire, wrapped in her beautiful cloak. With her delicate features and small stature, she looked extremely lovely.

And then... there were Kai and Caster.

Sunny sighed and looked down at his own scrawny body. Honestly, after all these months spent hunting monsters, eating meat and absorbing shadow fragments, he looked much better than he used to. In fact, by human standards, he was nothing short of... well, above average.

Even as far as Awakened went, he could probably compete with some in the looks department.

...But those two specimens were simply on another level!

Kai was tall and shaped like a young god, with lean muscles rolling under his flawless skin and a svelte figure that begged to be sculpted into a marble masterpiece. Sunny could swear that even sunlight was attracted to him,

illuminating the charming archer in just a way to make him look as gorgeous as possible.

Currently, Kai was tending to his arrows, somehow managing to make even that simple task look glamorous.

Caster was much the same, with a perfect body and broad shoulders that simply screamed of power, appeal and potency. With a darker skin to match his gallant and manly image, he was basically the epitome of masculinity. This was contrasted by a handsome, but gentle face and humorous green eyes, creating a rather tempting visage.

Sunny grimaced and turned away.

'You know what? To hell with this beach day nonsense! Let's do something productive...'

Chapter 208: Something Productive | Shadow Slave

Walking over to Kai, Sunny cleared his throat and forced himself to not cover his eyes. The damn archer was just too dazzling. Him being shirtless in crowded places should have honestly been categorized as a public hazard back in the real world.

If not, there was a gross oversight.

'I wonder how he was made. Probably in a secret government laboratory or a magic cauldron of some sort. I mean, there's no way that this dude is the same species as me... right?'

After a few seconds of Sunny blankly staring at him, Kai smiled politely:

"Uh, Sunny? Did you want something?"

Sunny flinched and covered his eyes.

"Ah! Don't smile at me!"

Kai blinked.

"...Alright."

Breathing heavily, Sunny glared at him and slowly lowered his hand.

"That's better. And yes, I did want something."

Kai suddenly livened up and pointed at his chest.

"What is that? An accessory?"

'What is he...'

Lowering his gaze, Sunny noticed the mysterious key hanging on a thread tied around his neck.

He didn't really want to show it to anyone, but with the Puppeteer's Shroud restoring itself in the Soul Sea, there were not a lot of places where he could hide it.

None that he was willing to use, at least...

Plus, no one else was supposed to be able to see the light of divinity, so to them, it just looked like a small iron key.

Sunny frowned.

"It's not an accessory. It's a key. "

Kai hesitated.

"Oh. What does it open?"

Sunny shrugged.

"How should I know?"

The charming archer seemed a little confused.

"But if it's not an accessory and it doesn't open anything, why are you carrying it around?"

His questions were starting to get tiresome. Sunny sighed.

"To open something, of course!"

Kai scratched his nose.

"But you just said that you don't know what it opens."

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"It's a damn key, right?! So it has to open something! I just carry it around in case I find something that can be opened by that damned key! What's so hard to understand?!"

The beautiful archer gave him a strange look.

"Oh... I see. That definitely makes sense."

'Curses! That's not how I planned to approach him...'

Sunny instantly changed his expression and looked at Kai with a wide smile.

...The sudden shift looked sort of creepy.

"Uh, what I wanted to say, Night, my dear friend... we are friends, right? Anyway, what I wanted to say was that I hope that this answer satisfies your curiosity. That's something a friend would say... right?"

The charming young man gave him a dubious look.

"I guess?"

Sunny made his smile wider, feeling his face hurt a little. panda novel

"Great! So we are friends. Well, some might say that it's your lucky day, buddy. Because today — and only today, probably! — Sunny's Gorgeous Emporium offers customers an exclusive friendship deal. Just for friends of the establishment. Aren't you lucky?"

Kai suddenly coughed.

"...Wasn't it Sunny's Brilliant Emporium last time?"

Sunny blinked.

"Was it? Well, doesn't matter. The deal still stands. Are you interested or not?"

The archer lingered for a few moments, and then cautiously said:

"But Sunny... you still haven't told me what exactly that deal entails. Is it a deal for customers you consider friends or are you trying to sell me your "friendship"? Or wait, do you want to buy mine? Or both? Ah, I'm confused."

As if waiting for that response, Sunny nodded energetically.

"Yes! I'm glad that you asked. In fact, I have an incredible item that I want to sell. It's so incredible that I am even reluctant to part with it. But since you are my friend, I am willing to give it away. Practically for free. Full friendship discount, just for you. No need to thank me, really."

Attracted by the noise, the others left what they were doing and were now staring at the two of them. Effie got distracted from preparing meat and was now observing the circus with an expectant grin.

Realizing that he is now the center of attention, Kai sighed.

"Alright, I'll bite. What is that incredible item you want to sell me?"

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, and then suddenly stopped smiling.

"Oh, just something I had gathering dust in my Soul Sea. It's a Memory that can serve as an endless supply of arrows. As long as you don't miss."

The beautiful archer's eyes suddenly lit up. He glanced at his quiver and said:

"Wait... really? You really have such a Memory?"

P AND A N OVEL After thinking about it for a long time, Sunny had decided to give the Blood Arrow to Kai. Having the archer of their cohort armed with it would make a lot of things easier during this journey.

He could potentially earn himself a bow in the future and learn how to use it, but it wouldn't be anytime soon. Plus, with how dangerous the

enchantments of the Blood Arrow were, nothing short of excellence would fly. And excellence took a lot of time to achieve, time that he didn't have. So, giving it to a skilled archer like Kai was a better decision.

Their recent encounters with the iron spiders only made Sunny more certain that this was the right thing to do.

But he wasn't going to give it away for free.

"Yes, I do have such a Memory."

Then, he casually added:

"Oh, did I forget to say? It's can provide an endless supply of arrows, and also all those arrows will be of the Ascended rank."

A grave silence settled over the marble arch.

"You... you're in possession of an Ascended Memory?"

That question was asked by Caster. Kai didn't have to ask, because he already knew that Sunny was telling the truth.

His eyes slightly widened.

On the Forgotten Shore, Ascended Memories were exceedingly rare — for an obvious reason. Sleepers could only get one by defeating a Fallen Nightmare Creature, and there weren't a lot of people capable of such a feat. Added to that was the fact that not every kill provided a Memory. In fact, most didn't.

To receive one was the dream of every inhabitant of the Dark City.

Sunny shrugged.

"Oh, I have a couple. Why?"

...The other being the onyx armor. Which was broken and useless. But they didn't need to know that, honestly.

He grinned.

"Only the best wares in the Sunny's Astonishing Emporium! Wait, uh... was it astonishing? Ah, who cares. You get the sentiment."

Caster shook his head.

"How did you get an Ascended Memory? You?"

The grin froze on Sunny's face. When he spoke a few moments later, all humor was gone from his voice, replaced by coldness.

"Well, if you have to know. I got it by killing a Fallen Beast. Before you ask... this time, I didn't have to shake my finger or spit. I just looked at it, and it died."

Then, he turned his head and looked straight at Caster:

"I am very proficient in killing things, you know."

Chapter 209: Fireside Banter | Shadow Slave

In the end, Kai agreed to his deal. In exchange for the Blood Arrow, he gave Sunny three Memories: the two weaker arrows he had and a small charm capable of producing fire.

Sunny fed all three to the Stone Saint, bringing her amount of shadow fragments to thirty-one. That was four more than she had in the past, which meant that he received the same amount of fragments that he would have gotten by feeding her the Blood Arrow itself.

He didn't really gain anything, but also didn't lose anything. Kai was the one who really profited from their exchange.

So Sunny didn't lie when he said that it was an incredible deal.

After breakfast, which transpired in somewhat awkward silence, Sunny sprawled on the ground and smiled happily.

"You know, guys. These past few weeks made me realize something. Actually, it was all thanks to Kai, who introduced me... introduced me... uh... to Stev."

Effie stretched, making Sunny stutter and lose the train of thought for a second, then smiled with satisfaction and glanced at him.

"Really? And what is that?"

Sunny hesitated for a few moments and said:

"When I was a little kid, I loved reading webtoons about the Awakened. You know, the ones where they always explore ancient ruins, battle Nightmare Creatures, and grow more powerful with each victory."

He chuckled.

"The hero and his cohort decide on an adventure, vanquish evil, gain mighty Memories, then return to the real world and sell their spoils at the adventurer shop. They spend their money to upgrade their equipment, and immediately set out on a more epic and dangerous adventure."

P AND A NOVEL Cassie smiled.

"I loved to read those too."

Sunny glanced at her and sighed.

"Yeah. But when I got older, I couldn't help but think — what are they thinking about? Exploring ancient ruins is not a wise thing to do. In fact, only crazy people would do it. No matter how good you are, sooner or later, you will meet something more terrifying than any human can handle and die. If this was real life, why would all those adventurers go into the ruins over and over again?"

The blind girl tilted her head and opened her mouth, but then closed it again.

Sunny smiled.

"But then it hit me! They were not doing it to vanquish evil. They were doing it to collect a wide variety of powerful Memories. You see, the real dream is not to be the hero, one of their companions, or even the love interest. The real dream is to be the owner of the shop where the hero sells his trophies and buys new equipment! That way you can live a pretty life without risking your neck. That's the real goal."

He crossed his arms and added:

"After a few short years of adventuring around the Dream Realm and collecting Memories, you can retire, open a shop, and leave comfortably for the rest of your life. All you need is to sell a Memory once every couple of years. Maybe make some money off the younger, less fortunate adventurers, too."

Kai laughed and looked at Sunny with curiosity.

"So... say that we somehow manage to return to the real world and become true Awakened. Is this what you're going to do?"

Sunny thought about it for a few moments and shrugged.

"I don't know. I don't really have a lot to do in the real world, apart from compiling all the things I've learned about the Forgotten Shore into a report and giving it to a teacher who was kind to me back at the Academy. So... maybe? I don't have enough Memories yet to open a real store, though."

He glanced at the charming archer and smiled.

"What about you? What is the thing you really want to do if you return to the real world?"

Kai suddenly turned away with a look of embarrassment on his face.

"Oh... I don't know. I haven't really thought about it."

But after several seconds, he suddenly said in a shy voice:

"...Avatar Singer."

Sunny blinked.panda novel

"A what?"

The archer hesitated for a while, and then explained:

"Avatar Singer is a music competition show. Popular singers compete with each other, but the twist is that they are all using the stock VR avatars to perform. So the judges can only evaluate their voices and skill. They only learn the singer's identity after."

Effie giggled.

"Why would you want to hide your pretty face, Night? It's your best feature!"

Kai was silent for a few moments, and then smiled gently.

"I just... I just think that it would be nice, to be judged based on my skill and talent alone, with nothing else getting in the way. Also, that would be such a great way to announce my return to the fans! Just imagine... they would be so excited! That would be a perfect media storm."

Sunny shook his head. It seemed that Kai was really a celebrity. Talking about things like fan reactions and media storms with a straight face... did he even hear himself?

But it was a nice dream, at least. Better than his own stupid desires, by far.

Turning to Effie, he asked:

"What about you? What would you do in the real world?"

The huntress grinned.

"I don't even have to think about it. I would go eat chicken wings... the real ones. And then start preparing myself for the Second Nightmare. Pretty simple."

Everybody grew silent. After a while, Cassie said:

"Are you sure that you want to challenge another Nightmare?"

Effie shrugged.

"I have my reasons. So yes. For me, that is the only choice."

The blind girl was quiet for a bit, and then said:

"I would go and spend time with my mom and dad. That's the thing I want to do most in the real world."

Caster glanced at her and courtly nodded.

"I agree with Cassie. Family is the most important. When I come back, I will greet my father and look him in the eyes with pride, knowing that I did not let our clan down. Then, I will try to do everything in my power to grow as fast as possible, to relieve him of his worries and propel our bloodline to new heights."

'How very... Legacy-like of him.'

Finally turning to Nephis, Sunny looked at her with a subtly dark expression and asked:

"How about you, Neph? What are you going to do when you return to the real world?"

Changing Star was silent for a while, looking into the distance with a calm expression.

Then, she sighed and answered in a quiet voice:

"I would go visit my mom, too."

Everyone grew silent. Sunny blinked, a little confused.

"Wait. Your mom? I thought she was dead."

Nephis lingered for a bit, and then turned her face away.

"She is. Technically."

Chapter 210: Shadow Of The Past

'Technically dead? What does she mean?'

Sunny glanced at the others and saw that they, too, were confused. Everyone except for Caster, that is, who seemed like he knew something.

A few moments passed in tense silence, which was broken by Changing Star's sigh. Looking at them, she said evenly:

"My mother is one of the Hollow. She became Hollow while pregnant with me, actually. So I never really met her. Just her... body."

Nephis grew silent. After a while, a strange smile appeared on her face.

"It's funny, really. When my grandmother was still alive, I made a point of treating that body as nothing but a corpse. But once she passed away and we were the only ones left... well. I found myself getting a bit confused."

P AND A N OVEL Nephis shrugged and turned away once again.

"Anyway, before leaving for the First Nightmare, I used what little money there was left of our estate to buy her a VIP spot in a specialized Hollow care facility. They are treating her really well. But still... I don't like the idea of her being alone there. So when I return, that's what I'm going to do. Visit her."

No one said anything, heavily affected by her words.

Sunny stared at Changing Star, trying to imagine what it must have felt like, growing up in the company of your parent's soulless shell. With death staring at you through those empty eyes every day, always looming over you like a dark shadow... both of your past and your future.

Maybe that was a part of the reason why Neph hated the Spell so much.

Sensing the heaviness in the air, Changing Star glanced at them and smiled darkly.

"What? Is this your first time meeting a hollowborn? Well, I can't blame you. Creatures of my breed are pretty rare. In fact, even I have never met another one."

Then, she sighed and stretched her legs, moving them closer to the fire.

"So yeah, that and dye my hair. These are the things I would do in the real world first."

Sunny blinked.

"...Dye your hair?"

Nephis nodded.

'How is that a priority?'

Feeling that he was missing something, Sunny scratched his head and asked:

"Why?"

She glanced at him in surprise.

"What do you mean, why? I'm not used to it, and it's weird. Do I need another reason?"

He stared at her with a perplexed expression. Noticing it, Changing Star frowned and asked with a tiny hint of amusement in her voice.

"Sunny... did you, perhaps, think that this is my natural hair color?"

He was silent for a while, then opened his mouth and closed it again.

"...It's not?"

Nephis looked at him for a while with a strange expression, and then suddenly exploded with laughter.

Her laugh was melodic, pure, and very pleasant to the ear. With regret, Sunny realized that he had never heard it before.

He wished that their lives were different, so that people could hear Nephis laugh more often. But they weren't, and would probably never be.

After a while, she glanced at him and smiled.

"Sunny, it's silver, for Spell's sake. Who has natural silver hair?"

Luckily, at that point, Kai suddenly came to his rescue:

"Actually, I thought that it's natural too. Ah... it suits you very well, Lady Nephis."

Changing Star turned to him with an expression of utter surprise. Then, she glanced at Effie with a silent question.

The huntress nodded.panda novel

"Yeah, me too. I mean... who knows what you Legacies are even made of?"

Nephis blinked a couple of times, then shook her head in bewilderment.

"Well... no, it's not natural. It became like that after my First Nightmare."

Kai leaned forward with curiosity:

"Really? What color was your hair before?"

She shrugged.

"Black. A normal human color."

The charming archer stared at her, and then smiled:

"That would suit you very well too, Lady Nephis. Ah, I can just see it."

However, Sunny couldn't. The idea of Changing Star without her arresting, eye-catching silver hair simply could not fit into his head. Let alone the fact that she was a brunette! How was this even possible?

'That would look so wrong! Right?'

Well... as it turned out, life was full of surprises.

Today, he learned not one, but two entirely new things about the person he had thought he knew the best in the world.

Who would have guessed that this would happen?

'...There might be something else except for skimpy swimsuits to these beach episodes, huh?'

After that, they spent some time resting and lazily conversing with each other. However, pretty soon, people started to get restless from boredom.

To combat it somehow, Sunny suggested the idea of playing a sports game.

...His motives were not at all dictated by a secret desire to see a bunch of absolutely gorgeous young people jump around and wrestle with each while very lightly dressed. Nope, not one bit.

However, things didn't go as he had envisioned them. Pretty soon, Sunny found himself cursing as he was desperately pulling on the golden rope in a furious match of tug of war.

...Well, it was supposed to be furious. But what was actually transpiring was Effie casually holding the rope with one hand while the four of them — Sunny, Cassie, Kai and Caster — were trying to move her from the spot with no visible results whatsoever. After a while, the huntress simply pulled on the rope and sent their entire team to the ground.

'That's... that's cheating!'

With a satisfied grin, Effie walked over and towered above him, her arms akimbo. Looking down directly at Sunny, she smirked.

"Weak. When did you lose your spirit, shorty?"

Then, she winked and said in a mischievous tone:

"Back at the cathedral, you were able to perform better. Not to mention last longer..."

Sunny grew bright red and gritted his teeth:

"Shut up! People will misunderstand!"

The huntress looked at him with a shocked expression.

"Mis—misunderstand? What are you... oh!"

Then, she pretended to be horrified and covered her mouth with one hand.

"You... what kind of a degenerate are you?! Training! I meant while you were training!"

While Sunny was staring at her in utter disbelief, his mouth wide open, Effie snorted, then turned away and exploded with laughter. Shaking her head, the boisterous huntress giggled one last time and walked away.

'...No more sports games! Ever! That wretched troublemaker will win them all, anyway!'

He needed to teach himself how to come up with better ideas...

Chapter 211: Game Of Lies

With a bit of disappointment, Sunny realized that all types of physical activities were out of the question. Not only because Effie was going to win every damn game, but also because Cassie couldn't participate in most.

If that was the case, they would have to settle for a battle of wit, instead.

After thinking for a while, he made a few preparations and addressed his companions in a mischievous tone:

"Alright, let's have another competition. This time, it will be a challenge for your minds."

Sunny paused for a few moments and then smiled.

"And to spice things up, this time, there will be a prize. The winner will get this!"

With that, he produced the ascended soul shard that he had gotten from the Corpse Eater from behind his back and showed it to everyone. The beautiful crystal shined with an alluring, ethereal light.

Except for Nephis, who was resting with her eyes closed, everyone stared at the shard with a lot of interest. Sunny grinned.

Of course, they were interested! It was very rare to see one of these, after all.

He didn't really have a use for this thing right now, though. And making the cohort stronger would, in turn, increase his own chances of getting through the expedition alive. So parting with the shard was not that detrimental.

Especially if he could have some fun in return.

Effie was the first one to speak:

"What are the terms of the competition?"

Sunny put the crystal away before answering:

"It's really simple. I'll give you a riddle, and the first person to answer correctly wins. How does that sound?"

The huntress looked at him with doubt and shrugged.

"Sounds boring. But alright, let's play."

Smiling, Sunny commanded the shadow to separate from him and put the Ordinary Rock on it. Then, he turned to Effie and said:

"Listen carefully. Imagine if you will that the two of us, my shadow and I, are in possession of a rare treasure. One of us is an honorable, extremely attractive Awakened that can tell no lie, while the other one is a vile, ugly, stupid devil that would never tell a word of truth. But you don't know which one is which."

Effie grinned.

"I mean... isn't it obvious?"

Sunny blinked.

"Shut up! Also, it's an imaginary situation. Okay? Anyway, you have to find out which one of us is hiding the treasure. If you do, you'll get the treasure. If you don't, the devil will kill you. You can only ask one question, either to me or the shadow. Understand?"

The huntress giggled and flexed her muscles.

"Can I just beat the answer out of you?"

Sunny observed her vigorous figure for a moment too long, and then smiled.

"You can. Also, you're dead."

Effie stared at him in bewilderment.

"What? Why?!"

He shrugged and glanced in her direction with disdain.

"Did I not tell you that you can only ask one question? Well who told you to ask whether you can beat me up or not? What a stupid way to waste a question!"

P AND A N OVEL While the unruly was huntress was throwing daggers at him with her eyes, Sunny turned away and said:

"Next!"

Kai smiled apologetically at Effie and approached him.

"Alright, Night. What's your question? Do consider that our roles might have changed since the last round."

The charming young man gestured at the marble beneath his feet and addressed the shadow:

"What color is the stone I am pointing to?"

Since Sunny had expected such a turn of events, the Ordinary Rock immediately answered in the deepest voice he could muster.panda novel

"...White."

Kai looked at Sunny with a triumphant smile and said:

"So... I win? The shadow is obviously the honorable Awakened."

Sunny gave him a nod.

"You indeed learned which one of us is a dirty liar. Surprise... it was me. However, that was not the task. The task was to find out which one of us is

hiding the treasure, and you have already used up your only question. So... sorry, buddy, but you're also dead. I'll miss you very much! In this hypothetical situation..."

The charming archer sighed and looked at him with reproach. Sunny raised his eyebrows.

"What? Why are you looking at me like this? Be grateful that I allowed you to play at all! With your Flaw, you are like a walking cheat as far as this game is concerned."

He scowled, then added:

"In fact, the mere fact that you claim to have a Flaw is an affront to us, truly Flawed people!"

Kai lingered for a bit and walked to the side to sit near Effie. Sunny had to suppress his laugh when he noticed that the boisterous huntress reacted to being this close to the charming young man's deific body pretty much exactly the same as he himself sometimes reacted to her.

'Get your head out of the gutter! Pure thoughts, Effie!'

A wide grin still found its way onto his face. Shaking his head, Sunny turned away to call the next contestant, but Kai suddenly spoke, interrupting him:

"You're not entirely right, you know," he said gently.

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"About what?"

The archer looked down before answering.

"About my Flaw. Yes, it is not as heavy of a burden as many others have to carry. But it's still a curse."

'What is he talking about? It's almost entirely like a second Aspect Ability!'

Looking at Kai with a doubtful expression, Sunny asked:

"Yeah? How, exactly? Please explain, because I really can't think of a situation where this Flaw of yours could be a burden."

The beautiful young man was silent for a while, and then looked up at Sunny with a sad smile.

"Imagine hearing the person who is the most important to you in the whole wide world telling you that they love you, only to realize that they don't. Imagine listening to your friend's words of encouragement, only to understand that he secretly wishes for you to crash and burn..."

He sighed.

"Ignorance is bliss, Sunny. After returning from my First Nightmare, I had to come to terms with the fact that most of the people in my life were not who I thought they were. And that what hid behind their smiles was ugly and vicious."

Kai gestured to himself and said:

"Because of who I am... and how I am... there was always a whirlpool of people around me. But after learning their true faces, I couldn't... well. Let's just say that, if I had the choice, I would have preferred to stay blissfully blind to the truth forever."

He grew quiet.

'Damn.'

Suddenly, Kai smiled.

"But that's why I enjoy spending time with you so much, Sunny! No matter how bizarre the things you say are, they're always true. I never met anyone as stupidly honest as you. It's very refreshing!"

Sunny shifted uncomfortably.

'Uh... did he just call me stupid?'

Now he was kind of sorry for mocking the charming young man about his Flaw. Perhaps it would be useful to someone like Sunny. But to a person like Kai, who always attracted the worst kind of attention from people, it could really be incredibly painful.

The Spell knew what it was doing.

It always hit you in your most vulnerable spot.

'Damned Spell. The being that weaved it must have been the worst kind of a sick bastard...'

Chapter 212: Knights And Knaves

"Uh... sure."

One day Kai would inevitably learn that Sunny was not as honest of a person as he considered him to be, but until then, having the naive archer believe in this ridiculous notion was rather... beneficial.

Turning away with a bit of awkwardness, Sunny glanced at Caster and called:

"Next!"

The proud Legacy was looking at Nightingale with a heavy expression. Hearing Sunny's voice, he lingered for a moment and then shook his head.

It seemed that Caster did not want to play his game.

Sunny was also suddenly painfully aware that between the six of them, four people had openly shared their Flaws with the rest, be it out of necessity or because of trust. Only two had not.

One of the two was Sunny, and the other one was Caster.

Sunny knew why he was hiding his Flaw from everyone, but what was the proud scion's reason? It sort of went against his whole honorable and dependable persona. With how devoted he acted toward Nephis and the cohort, it was strange to see him keeping secrets.

Was his reason the same as Sunny's, a dire vulnerability that the Flaw would uncover? Or was there some other reason? Maybe he didn't trust the members of the cohort as much as he tried to make them think he did.

And if so... why?

With a shrug, Sunny left Caster alone. There was no point in lingering on these thoughts now. Until he had more information, any conclusion he

could make would be useless, anyway.

Looking at Cassie, he smiled and said:

"Hey, Cas. Wanna give it a try?"

The blind girl hesitated for a bit, and then slowly approached him.

While she was walking over, Sunny couldn't help but think back to a conversation he had with her in the distant past. Back then, Cassie had told him that knowledge could be the heaviest thing in the world. The burden of her Flaw, while completely different from Kai's, was at the same time eerily similar.

They both longed for the bliss of ignorance, but were doomed to always bear the crushing weight of unwanted knowledge.

When Sunny thought about it, he found that all members of the cohort were connected with each other by invisible strings. Many things about them were like reflections, simultaneously the same, but also completely opposite.

Like the fact that he could tell no lie, while Kai could not be lied to. Or the fact that Nephis was like sunlight, while he was made of shadows. Cassie could not see, while he had basically two pairs of eyes. Changing Star dreamed of destroying the Nightmare Spell, but Effie dreamed of making it her paradise.

And so on.

Were these the strings of fate? Or was he just making empty connections because that was what humans were prone to do?

Come to think of it, only Caster didn't seem to be connected to any of them in any kind of a meaningful way. What was that all about?

Cassie sat down near Sunny, pulling him out of his thoughts.

He forced out a smile.

"Ah, right. Just like I said, the roles might have switched. So, what is your question?"

Cassie smiled and gestured to the shadow.

"My question is: if I were to ask Sunny which one of you has the treasure, what would he say?"

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then gave the Ordinary Stone a mental command to speak one of the answers that he had whispered to it in advance.

In the same comically deep voice, the shadow seemed to speak:

"...The shadow has it."

Cassie nodded and turned to Sunny with subtle glee on her exquisite, doll-like face.

"Sunny, you have the treasure. Give."

With that, she expectantly outstretched her hand.

With a disappointed sigh, Sunny put the ascended soul shard in her palm and said in a listless voice:panda novel

"Congratulations. You've won. Great job, yay."

Cassie grasped the shard and giggled.

Meanwhile, Effie leaned forward with a bewildered look:

"What?! That's it?!"

She stared at the blind girl in astonishment, and then asked:

P AND A N OVEL "How the hell did you do it?"

Cassie smiled and crushed the shard in her small fist, absorbing the soul essence. Then, she shook her head and said:

"It's simple, really. No matter who you ask about the other person's answer, their answer will always be the opposite of the correct one. That's because the Awakened would have to tell the truth about the lie, while the devil would have to tell a lie about the truth. Do you understand?"

Effie thought for a moment, then shook her head.

"Nope. All the words you said seem to be familiar, but I don't understand crap. What do you even mean?"

Cassie laughed.

"Well, you should think about it in your free time. Or, you know... just beat Sunny up the next time he decides to tease you with such riddles."

With that, she went away, quite happy with herself.

Sunny watched her go with his mouth wide open.

'Did she really just say that?!

Meanwhile, the perplexed huntress was staring at Sunny with a deep frown.

"Yeah... I might just do that the next time..."

He paled.

"What's up with that? This was an honest competition! Don't be a sore loser!"

Effie grinned menacingly.

"Sore? Let's see which one of use will be sore when I'm done with you."

'What... what kind of soreness does she mean, I wonder? Wait, no! Why would I wonder about that?!

Standing up, Sunny glanced at Effie and scoffed.

"Who's going to be done with who? Don't flatter yourself, beanpole."

With that, he walked away with contempt clearly written all over his face.

His pace, however, was suspiciously hurried.

A while later, the day was drawing to a close. Some of the Memories had already restored themselves, so almost everyone was wearing their clothes and armors.

Which, as far as Sunny was concerned, was a real shame.

...From a purely aesthetic point of view, of course!

However, something else attracted his full attention.

At the far end of the marble arch, Nephis and Caster were standing facing each other, with sharp swords in their hands.

They were about to clash...

Chapter 213: Sword Saints | Shadow Slave

Back when Nephis was teaching Sunny how to use the sword, he had never been good enough to be her sparring partner. Once he learned enough to be of any use in a training fight, their fragile alliance had already broken and shattered to pieces.

So, apart from that short altercation on the somber slopes of the Ashen Barrow, they had never actually crossed swords with each other.

Now, it seemed, Changing Star had found a reliable sparring partner. Caster had not only replaced Sunny as her right-hand man, but also filled the roles that Sunny had been either reluctant or unfit to take on.

'Well... good for them.'

Once the Memories of the cohort were close to being fully restored, Nephis and Caster moved to the far end of the white arch to practice. Now, they were standing opposite each other, ready to begin.

Although no one called him over, Sunny approached the two Legacies and sat down, ready to enjoy the spectacle. He was keenly interested in observing these two immensely skilled swordsmen in action.

Both of them had been trained for combat from the day they could walk. Watching them would surely be helpful to his understanding of battle styles and techniques. Not to mention that he was very interested to see the rematch between Nephis and Caster. The last time he saw them fight, Changing Star had lost, but not by much.

She also had held back her Aspect Ability at that time, but he doubted that that would change today. Neph's flame could be used both to heal and annihilate, but sadly, not to train.

Caster glanced at him and frowned with visible displeasure.

Was he irritated because Sunny was about to learn a thing or two about his technique, or because Sunny was ruining his alone time with Nephis?

'Either way, I don't care.'

"What are you doing?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Watching. Why? Does this part of the arch belongs to your clan or something?"

The proud Legacy shook his head and turned away.

"Do as you wish."

Neph glanced at Sunny and didn't say anything. However, he could tell that she didn't mind.

In fact, it was almost as if she was approving of his decision.

Without wasting any more time, the two of them clashed in a whirlwind of steel, moving with the kind of speed that made it difficult for Sunny to follow along. The clangor of swords filled the air.

A bit stunned, he stared at the furious fight with a blank expression.

'...Damn.'

After the months of hunting monsters in the Dark City and his lessons with the Stone Saint, Sunny thought that he had developed his skill a lot. And he did. It's just that compared to Nephis and Caster, he was still so far behind that it was nothing short of disheartening.

Before, he had sometimes entertained the thought of maybe being able to stand against them... well, at least one of them... on equal ground. But now, this illusion was ruthlessly broken.

If things went south and he ended up on the opposite sides of the barricades with Caster, facing him would be tantamount to committing suicide. For now, at least.

Which, of course, simply meant that instead of facing him, Sunny would have to stab him in the back.

'Duly noted.'

He wasn't going to take on an enemy of this caliber in a forthright manner, anyway. What was he, a fool?

Concentrating on the fight, Sunny watched attentively. With the benefit of his new experience, he was able to discern more and learn more from how these two experts moved and acted. Sometimes, he was even able to predict what they were going to do next.

However, as time passed, a subtle frown appeared on his face.

'What is she doing? That doesn't make sense.'

Sunny had been able to notice two unexpected things from how Nephis fought against Caster.

The first one was rather easy to spot. While Caster did not use the full extent of his incredible speed, he did use a fair share of it, making it almost impossible for Nephis to win any of their matches. She lost much more than she won, almost always by a few fractions of a second. Which was seemingly not conducive to training at all.

What was the point of training if one of the participants had almost no chance of winning because of how large the gap between them and their opponent was? There was a reason why Neph had never used Sunny as a sparring partner in the past, after all.

But then, with a bit of amusement, he realized that Changing Star was doing exactly what he had done with the Stone Saint. She was tempering herself

against an overwhelming force. That's why she had instructed Caster to use just enough of his Aspect Ability to always be much faster than her.

Losing in a fight against a superior opponent was truly the best way to learn.

'Ha! So I was right in my approach, after all.'

If Changing Star was doing the same, he had to be right.

The second thing he had noticed, however, was much more perplexing.

It was that Nephis was not using her usual flowing and unpredictable battle style. Instead, she was moving with precise and firm elegance, hiding behind a carefully woven wall of defense and patiently waiting for an opening to appear — instead of creating one herself.

While intricate and impressive, this style was still a bit lacking in comparison to her real one. What's more, while it was deliberate and dependable, it was also rigid.

If there was one thing that Nephis would never tolerate in her battle art, it was rigidity. Her whole worldview was built around the idea that nothing had more value than adaptability. That's why the style she had taught Sunny suited her so well.

It was designed to be the epitome of changeability.

So, the question was...

Why the hell she was using something so alien to her against Caster?

The answer was pretty obvious. Either Nephis was trying to experiment with something new in an effort to adopt elements of this style into her own... which didn't seem very likely...

Or she didn't want Caster to know her true combat style too well, for some reason.

But what could that reason be?

Sunny rubbed his chin.

'Interesting...'

Chapter 214: Transient Shadow | Shadow Slave

214 Transient Shadow

Did Nephis distrust Caster for some reason?

Sunny surely did, and to be entirely honest, he didn't even need any reason to do so. His intuition and general paranoia were enough.

But Changing Star was different. He had learned a bitter lesson and now knew that everything she ever did had a firm logic behind it. Even if that logic was entirely different from that of a normal person.

So if Nephis was hiding her true battle style from Caster, there was a reason for it.

But it didn't make any sense. From everything else that she had done, he was her most trusted lieutenant. Changing Star entrusted more to Caster than she ever had to anyone else. Caster himself also had never acted against Nephis's interests.

In fact, he was even a bit too loyal. The bastard was always near Nephis, as though glued to her side. He also didn't seem to like it when others got too close to her.

In that regard, he was almost like that flying rapier of Cassie's. During their entire day on the marble arch, the unfriendly Echo somehow always managed to remain between the blind girl and any men who tried to approach her for whatever reason. The message it was sending was quite clear.

I'm watching you!

It was honestly rather comical.

Sunny shook his head. The dynamic of Changing Star's relationship with Caster was really weird. But once again, he didn't have enough information

to make any conclusions. All he could do was keep his eyes open and try to sleep with one of them open when the handsome Legacy was on watch duty.

Maybe it was some strange Legacy thing? Like guarding the secrets of the clan against the prying eyes of other clans.

Who knew?

Glancing at the fighting swordsmen, Sunny suddenly got an idea.

After considering it for a bit, he looked at them again. This time, his eyes were burning.

'That... that actually might work!'

The problem with his technique at the moment was that it lacked true individuality. Sunny knew that there was a secret hiding inside his shadow that could become the foundation of his own unique battle style.

He just couldn't understand what that secret was.

His progress at deciphering it had stalled. While training, Sunny had trouble keeping his eyes both on the Stone Saint and on the shadow. Whenever he tried, the taciturn knight would inevitably send him into a sea of pain. But even if he managed it somehow, there was an invisible wall standing between him and anything even remotely resembling understanding.

He was in a dire need of a breakthrough.

So what if... his shadows tried to imitate someone else instead of him? And not just someone, but a real sword expert in the middle of a fight?

Not only would Sunny be able to observe every tiny detail of its movements, but there would also be something to compare them against.

The shadow was a part of him, after all. It was hard to tell where Sunny ended and the shadow began. That's why the difference in how it moved and how he moved was almost imperceptible.

But if it followed someone else, he would be able to separate the cadence and pattern of that person's movements from the shadow's by contrasting it against his own.

This had to work!

Burning with anticipation, Sunny waited for Nephis and Caster to take a short break, and then send the shadow over to the handsome Legacy.

Leisurely strolling over the white marble, the shadow approached Caster and brazenly glued itself to his feet. Then, it crossed its arms and glared at the Legacy with almost palpable disdain.

Caster stared at the shadow for a couple of seconds and then raised his head to look at Sunny. There was a very strange expression on his face.

"What... what are you doing?"

His voice did not sound happy at all.

Sunny shrugged with a carefree smile.

"Oh, don't mind him. This cretin just lost me an ascended soul shard. As a form of punishment, I've decided to make him your shadow for a bit. So, you know. Just do your thing and don't worry about it."

The shadow turned its head and pierced him with a menacing look.

Sunny could practically hear its thoughts...

...Who are you calling a cretin, you cretin?

'That had to be it. Did I guess right, huh? Oh, sorry. I forgot you cannot answer.'

Not paying the offended shadow any more attention, he just smiled wider.

Caster frowned, hesitated for a few moments, and then said through gritted teeth:

"I would prefer if you wouldn't."

Sunny sighed.

"Ugh, alright. Whatever."

With that, he gave the shadow the command to leave the proud Legacy alone.

It separated itself from Caster, pretended to wipe its legs in disgust... and sauntered over to Nephis, only to get attached to her feet with visible delight. It even bowed gallantly to her own shadow and made sure to not get in its way.

'What... what is this moron doing?'

Of course, Sunny had ordered the shadow to approach Neph himself. But he didn't expect it to be so visibly pleased by it.

It was as if the shadow was simply beyond itself to finally follow someone competent.

'You traitor!'

Nephis looked down on the shadow, smiled, and didn't say anything.

'Well... good. Now, fight!'

The two Legacies did not make him wait long. A few moments later, they were once again locked in a furious battle. Only this time, two shadows were following Nephis.

Both of them loyally imitated her movements, however, one of them was slightly... almost imperceptibly... different.

Sunny looked at it with an intensity that threatened to burn two holes in the white marble.

Soon, his eyes widened.

'I... I see it! I think I see it!'

There, in the tiniest difference between the way Changing Star's own shadow moved and the way his shadow moved, he finally saw it.

He had found his breakthrough.

Chapter 215: Shapeless | Shadow Slave

Observing the motions of two shadows that followed Nephis, Sunny was finally able to understand the foundation of the elusive shadow style.

Before, he only sensed a hint of its essence. He knew that just like the shadow, the hidden battle art was insidious, shapeless, and everchanging. But this was where lay the problem: a battle style was, by definition, a structured framework of patterns and principles, a doctrine that dictated how one should act to defeat an enemy.

That doctrine was used as a foundation and expanded into a variety of specific movements to create a style.

But If something didn't have a shape and its form was constantly changing, how could it ever be stable and structured? Sunny had no idea how the concepts he felt were at the core of the shadow style could create something even remotely applicable to practice.

Insidious, shapeless, everchanging. What was he supposed to do with that?

But now, he understood. The key to it all was so simple and evident that he almost laughed. Why had he not guessed earlier? It was so obvious.

The idea that tied everything together was as innate to the nature of shadows as formlessness and elusiveness.

It was imitation.

After all, what were the first two things that came to mind when one thought about shadows? That they lived in the dark and imitated the things that hid them from light.

The foundation of the shadow style was indeed insidious, shapeless, and everchanging. Its core concept was to steal that which made the enemy strong and use it to destroy them.

To master that style, he had to learn how to behave like a shadow.

Sunny stared at Nephis and Caster, but didn't see them. His mind was consumed completely by the sudden revelation. He had no time to pay attention to their fight anymore.

This style... this style had endless potential. If he managed to master it, he would be able to counter any style or technique used against him, not to mention become an immensely unpredictable opponent.

What could be more unpredictable than a formless shadow?

Of course, it was easier said than done. To begin with, while the ability to imitate the enemy was incredibly powerful, it also demanded an incredible amount of talent, experience, and insight from the user. You couldn't imitate that which you didn't understand, after all.

More importantly, this was just the foundation of the style. He still had to expand it into the actual collection of specific principles... and retrain himself accordingly.

That was a mammoth task.

Creating a complete style from scratch could take a true battle master years, if not decades. Sunny had not even scratched the surface of this ambitious underetaking.

However, this was alright. It was a start. Personal battle arts were not created in an instance, anyway. It was a long and arduous process, with endless iterations coming and going while being tempered by the crucible of combat.

It's not like the style would be useless until it became perfect.

Sunny just had to get it to the point where it could be applied in battle in one form or another. That alone would tremendously enhance his technique.

He smiled, congratulating himself. However, the next moment, a deep scowl appeared on his face.

'Uh... but how, exactly, am I supposed to do that?'

A while later, when the sun was already touching the western horizon, Sunny was sitting by himself and staring at his shadow. He was motionless like a statue and deep in thought. On his face, there was a troubled frown.

When someone approached him, Sunny lingered for a few moments and then slowly looked up to see who was disturbing him.

To his surprise, it was Nephis.

The leader of their cohort stood there for a bit, her graceful figure illuminated by the setting sun. Then, she sat down near him.

Sunny blinked.

"Uh... hey Neph."

Nephis gave him a nod.

"Hey, Sunny."

He waited for a few moments, and then asked:

"...Did you want something?"

The corner of her mouth slightly curled upward. With a sigh, Changing Star glanced at him and said:

"It's nothing much. I just wanted to say that I saw you fighting in the catacombs. You have improved a lot in these three months. Well done."

Sunny smiled.

"Ah, that. Well, it's not like there's a lot of opportunities to lead a peaceful life in the Dark City. I was bound to improve a little, no?"

She shook her head.

"Don't sell yourself short. You really did well. Very few would have been able to grow so much and as fast as you. Especially without a teacher."

After hesitating for a while, Sunny shrugged.

"You said it yourself. One real battle is worth more than a thousand hours of training. There was... a lot of battles. In those three months."

Nephis nodded, and then asked:

"That firm and grounded style you weaved into your technique... where did it come from?"

He scratched the back of his head and, remembering the hellish training sessions with his pet monster, held back the urge to shiver.

"I just observed how the Stone Saint fought and tried to replicate it."

Changing Star smiled:

"As I thought. I've seen her fight, too. It's a very formidable Echo. One of the finest I've ever seen."

Coming from a Legacy, this meant a lot. Sunny was indeed really lucky to be in the right place at the right time to get the Echo of the Stone Saint. If the Fallen siblings of the iron spiders had not brought her to the brink of death, he would never have been able to survive a battle with the living statue, let alone defeat her.

He was even luckier to have a Divine Aspect that allowed him to turn Echoes into creatures that were even more fearsome.

All in all, Sunny was extremely fortunate.

His fortune was exactly as incredible as his misfortune.

He grinned.

"You know my Attributes. I do get lucky a lot."

She lingered for a few moments, and then said:

"I'm glad that you were able to understand the true design of the battle style I taught you."

So he was right on this point, too. The style Changing Star had given him was indeed designed to be as adaptable as possible and seamlessly incorporate elements of other styles. It was a perfect foundational battle art... for those talented enough to make use of it, of course.

Which were, most likely, extremely few and far between.

Sunny glanced at Nephis and, after some deliberation, asked:

"That style of yours is truly unique. Where did it come from?"

He had been too inexperienced to realize this at the time, but what Nephis had taught him could have been considered a rare treasure. The style he took for granted was, in fact, a work of pure genius. It deserved to be famous and ubiquitous.

But it was not. Which suggested that this treasure was a secret one.

Changing Star lingered for a bit, and then said:

"It's a part of my inheritance."

Sunny blinked and stared at her, stunned.

'Then... then why the hell did she teach it to me?!'

Chapter 216: Tacit Understanding | Shadow Slave

Sunny stared at Nephis with a complicated expression. After a while, he asked:

"Why did you entrust me with something so precious?"

She glanced at him, lingered for a few moments, then shrugged.

"We had a deal, remember? My knowledge in exchange for your share of the spoils we earn."

There had indeed existed such a deal. However, he had not exactly acted in good faith when proposing it. After all, he had no use for those spoils, in the first place.

Sunny scowled. If Changing Star had really revealed a family secret to him because of a lie, she had a valid reason to be resentful of him.

Just like he was of her.

With a dark smile, he looked away and said:

"You must have realized by now that I have cheated you in that deal."

Nephis turned to him and said, her voice calm and even:

"You mean the fact that you don't need to absorb soul shard to grow stronger?"

Sunny froze for a moment, then gave her a nod.

"You don't seem very surprised."

Figures. When Sunny first learned about this ability of his, he was stunned. But Nephe seemed to know a lot more than a normal person did.

She didn't even try to pretend otherwise.

"It's a very rare Aspect trait, but not unheard of among the upper echelons of the Awakened. In fact, I am capable of something like that myself. Although your case does seem to be especially unique."

Sunny glanced at her.

"How so?"

Changing Star remained silent for a few moments and then said, her voice hinted with a bit of wonder:

"Usually, when an Awakened absorbs the soul essence directly, the process leaves the remnants of the soul core empty. But when you do it, the shards are left brimming with it. This is very... unusual."

He shifted uncomfortably, and then said:

"Yeah, well... you have your share of secrets, too, Neph. Don't think that I didn't notice. Lineage Memories, Domains..."

Nephis interrupted him with a heavy gaze. When Sunny fell silent and looked at her with a frown, she said in a strangely somber tone:

"Never say those words aloud again, Sunny. I am serious. Just knowing them might get you killed."

He stared at her for a long time, and then scoffed.

"No problem. Since you showed me the courtesy of not prying into my secrets, I won't pry into yours. I don't really want to know, anyway. The mysterious "upper echelons" you mentioned can play their dirty little games all they want, as long as they leave me out of them."

Then, Sunny frowned and added:

"But there is one question I have to ask you, because it involves me personally."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Sure. Ask away."

He grimaced.

"Why are you hiding the true core of your technique from Caster?"

Changing Star looked at him for a bit, and then smiled.

"So you've noticed. That's good, too. Yes... I've been using a different style when facing Caster."

Sunny looked at her with a humorless expression.

"Why?"

She shrugged.

"Why did you incorporate elements of the Stone Saint's technique into your own?"

He shook his head.

"To become stronger. Also, nice try at misdirection, but I won't fall for your tricks. I'm the one who taught them to you, remember? So just stop. Answer my question."

Nephis sighed and turned away, glancing at the silhouette of the Crimson Spire that loomed in the distance. After a while, she said:

"I'll answer you when we return to the Dark City. It won't change anything until then, anyway. Your safety won't be compromised in any way."

'What is that supposed to mean?'

As he glared at her, Changing Star stood up and turned to leave. Before that, however, she lingered for a moment and said:

"Keep sharpening your sword, Sunny. I expect big things from you."

With that, she walked away, leaving him speechless.

'And what does she mean by that?!

After Nephis left, Sunny returned to staring at his shadow. However, despite the fact that he had figured out the essence and foundation of the elusive battle art that hid inside it, he had no idea how to go about creating an actual style out of them.

He did not have enough experience and mastery to be able to create something out of nothing. It was a dead end.

'Curses! Why even hide that damn mystery inside the Aspect if I can't do anything with it?!

Perhaps in the distant future, he would be able to. But right now, it was as though he had found the door, but was not strong enough to turn the key and unlock it. It just stood there and teased him endlessly, just like the damn Gateway inside the Crimson Spire.

It was pure torture.

'Maybe I wasn't supposed to notice the existence of the hidden style so soon...'

But he did! And he worked so hard to gain insight into its secrets. Was it all for nothing? All the pain, all the effort?

Why would Spell do this to him?

'Do you have to ask? That's the damn Spell we're talking about! Why wouldn't it do something like this to you?"

With a bitter sigh, Sunny turned away and tried to forget all about the shadow, techniques, and battle styles. It was almost dark, anyway.

'Time to sleep.'

Walking over to the center of the marble arch, Sunny lay down beside the other members of the cohort and tiredly closed his eyes.

The beach vacation was over. It was funny, visually stunning, and unexpectedly emotional... but ended on a bitter note.

Tomorrow was going to be another long day.

'To hell with this. This... this...'

Exhausted by all of it, he fell asleep before even finishing the thought.

'...this crap.'

Sunny opened his eyes and looked around in confusion.

The world was enveloped in a strange, dim twilight. Deep shadows surrounded him, shrouding the tall walls that were cut from black marble. Looking between the mighty columns, Sunny saw the black circle of the sun burning in the lightless sky.

'An... an eclipse?'

No, wait... what walls? What columns? Wasn't he supposed to be sleeping at the top of the white arch?

...What was happening?

Suddenly, a woman's scream tore the silence like a sharp knife. It was full of pain and suffering. Sunny tried to summon the Midnight Shard into his hand... only to realize that he had no hands.

Then, something else resounded from the darkness.

...A baby's cry.

'Wh—what the...'

Almost at the same time, Sunny realized something terrible.

This was a dream. He was dreaming.

...People were not supposed to dream in the Dream Realm!

'...Not good!'

Chapter 217: Origin | Shadow Slave

When Sunny realized that he was dreaming, the first thing that came to his mind was that there was another soul tree growing somewhere near the white arch. However, after a few moments of panic, he quickly dismissed this idea.

After all, he had never actually dreamt while under the mind hex of the ancient fiend. He had just mistaken the broken memories of his conversation with Cassie for a dream.

But this... this one was real.

The dreamscape that surrounded Sunny was ephemeral, shifting, and shrouded in shadows. Above him, the sun was like a circle of darkness, with crimson light drowning in a burning sea of clouds. However, none of that light reached him.

In the tenebrous hall of black marble, there was nothing but empty silence.

...Which was now destroyed by the sound of a baby crying, of course.

The woman's screams had long grown silent. Peering into the stygian depths of the dark marble hall, Sunny saw nothing but endless shadows. The baby's cries were coming from somewhere beyond them.

...Or from within them.

A subtle thought entered Sunny's mind. The monumental walls, the colossal columns, the grandiose hall... all of it looked strangely familiar. As though he had already been here once, a long time ago.

All that was missing were the signs of desolation and a large altar cut from a single block of black marble. In fact, it should have been standing right where the crying sounds were coming from.

Familiar words appeared in his mind, now full of new meaning.

'...Child of Shadows?'

In the next moment, everything disappeared.

The world was swaying. A seemingly endless surface of black stone was flowing past his vision, moving up and down.

...No, it wasn't the stone, but Sunny himself. He was the one swaying.

'Wh—what?!'

In fact, Sunny found himself in the body... of a toddler. He was currently held gently by a young woman who was walking down a long stone corridor, which was dimly lit by burning torches. Hence, the swaying.

The girl was very young, not older than Sunny himself — his actual body, that is. She was slender and exquisitely beautiful, with soft porcelain skin and long raven hair. The lissome beauty was dressed in a flowing silk tunic that left her delicate neck and shoulders exposed.

A black serpent was coiled around her arms and neck, its scales so intricately tattooed that sometimes, it seemed as though the creature was moving. Whoever marked the girl's skin with this image was a true genius of their craft. Sunny had never seen anything like it in the real world.

However, he had seen similar markings in a Nightmare.

...This was the mark of a slave who belonged to the Shadow God.

The young girl was a temple slave, just like he had been in his First Nightmare. The serpent coiled around her neck and arms served both as her collar and her shackles.

She was also the toddler's mother. Sunny could tell from the love with which she held the child and the quiet smile that appeared on her face every time she looked at him.

Sunny might have lost his own mother at a young age, but he still remembered that much, at least.

'If the mother is a slave, then the child is, too.'

Finally, Sunny began to understand what was happening to him.

The dream he found himself in did not belong to him. Instead, it belonged to the nameless temple slave whose role he had assumed during the First Nightmare.

The original child of shadows.

This vision was his memory.

Soon, the young girl entered a vast hall that was shrouded in darkness. Judging by the black marble walls, they were in another part of the ancient temple. Sunny couldn't see much of his surroundings, but he could somehow tell that they were underground.

In the center of the hall, seven tall braziers were burning with strange, pale flames. On the edges of light, motionless, stood a dozen or so people.

Sunny shivered, suddenly reminded of the silent shadows populating his Soul Sea. However, these were not ghosts, but humans. There were several other slaves, while the rest appeared to be priests.

To tell the truth, there was not a lot of difference between them. It seemed as though the servants of the Shadow God did not pursue opulence and status. In fact, many of the priests bore the same markings as the slaves, suggesting that they themselves had belonged to the temple once.

'What are they doing here? What is happening?'

Approaching one of the elder slaves, the young beauty entrusted the child to her. Separated from the warmth of his mother's chest, the toddler...

Sunny... felt cold and scared. However, the older woman consoled him with gentle words, preventing the child from crying.

Then, she moved back to stand with the rest of the people gathered in the underground hall. Their faces were calm and solemn.

The young woman, meanwhile, slowly walked into the circle of light. Her movements were elegant, flowing, and graceful.

Stopping at the very center, she stood motionlessly between the seven pale flames, surrounded by seven shadows.

Sunny stared at the beautiful slave, feeling that something important was about to happen.

But... what?

As he became pensive and uneasy, a sudden sound broke the silence. It was the deep and reverberating ringing of a zither.

As the musical instrument sang, the slave girl suddenly moved.

As she did, her seven shadows moved with her.

'This... this is...'

With his eyes wide open, Sunny watched the young woman.

She was dancing.

The beautiful slave danced in the circle of light surrounded by impenetrable darkness, her every move full of indescribable grace and clear, but elusive purpose. Her young body was flexible and lithe, but also strong and trained as much as a warrior's. Her skill as a dancer was like that of a battle master.

It was mesmerizing.

The young woman weaved a beautiful pattern with her movements, their cadence and nature simultaneously firm and flowing, sharp and gentle, clear

and unpredictable. She danced alone but also with seven partners, effortlessly controlling both her own body and the seven shadows cast by it.

At times, it was hard to tell which one of them was real.

Her dance was... insidious, shapeless, and everchanging.

Sunny froze.

He recognized these movements. They were the same as how his shadow moved.

This was the source and origin of the battle style he wanted to create

This was Shadow Dance...

Chapter 218: Shadow Dance | Shadow Slave

Sunny opened his eyes.

The grand arch of white marble was exactly the same as when he had last seen it. The sun was already climbing the grey dome of the sky, chasing the remnants of the dark sea away. The rest of the cohort had woken up some time ago and were now preparing for the journey ahead.

He had overslept.

However, it didn't matter.

With eyes burning with excitement, Sunny sat up and recalled everything that he had witnessed in his dream.

The memories were still there, clear as day. He could recall every movement, every step, every breath of the dance that the beautiful slave had performed.

..The nameless slave's mother.

His eyes dimmed slightly.

That dream of his, while a precious gift, was also a source of numerous questions. Now that he was awake, Sunny was able to see a few things with more clarity.

The scene that he had witnessed at the very beginning of it was that of the nameless slave's... the original Child of Shadow's... birth. He was born during a solar eclipse, not unlike Sunny.

That fact put a lot of things into perspective. Everyone knew that the Spell did not choose the role an Aspirant would play during their First Nightmare randomly. That was apparent from the fact that the bodies they inhabited in it, while different, were very close to their real ones.

However, the actual principle of how the Spell chose these roles and the events of the Nightmares were largely unclear.

But now, Sunny knew that he shared more than simply outer appearance with the temple slave whose body he inhabited for a few short days.

Both of them were born in similar, extremely rare circumstances. Both of them were at the very bottom of society, oppressed and unwanted, surviving against all odds instead of because of them.

Both of them were left without a family at a young age. The tough life in the outskirts took Sunny's parents and sister away. To the nameless slave, it was the servants of the mighty War God that destroyed his childhood home and life. Sunny didn't know what happened to the beautiful dancer after the last temple of Shadows was destroyed by them... but he doubted that it was anything good.

With a heavy sigh, he looked down.

...Fate. It was fate. What he shared with the temple slave was a similarity of fate.

Sunny was growing more and more convinced that the Spell was connected to the Strings of Fate in some way.

Perhaps it was weaved from them.

Remembering the void he had found himself in after completing his first trial, Sunny looked into the distance with wonder. That void was filled with a myriad of stars that served as nexuses for an inconceivably complex net made of countless strings of silver light.

Were those the strings of fate?

He shook his head.

Whatever they were, and whatever the Spell was, it was not something he could know or understand... yet. Numerous people, most of them better informed and smarter than him, had tried and failed.

It was wiser to concentrate on something within his reach.

The Shadow Dance!

Sunny smiled.

He wasn't so engrossed by the dancing of the beautiful slave girl because it was truly stunning and enchanting. He was riveted beyond belief by it because he recognized the pattern of the battle style hiding in his shadow in her graceful movements.

Turns out, it wasn't a battle art at all. It was a dance.

But was there a difference?

Not in this case, not really.

It wasn't a coincidence that people often described the way true masters of battle fought as dancing. At their core, fighting and dance were very close. That's why combat, when brought to a truly impressive level, was like a dance.

So why couldn't a dance, when mastered to perfection, be like a battle art?

Sunny was certain that he was right. He had already comprehended the essence of Shadow Dance and gained insight into its foundation. With the memory of the beautiful dancer moving as one with her seven shadows, he now had the last piece of the puzzle — the actual set of moves and principles that he could use to create an actual battle style in their image.

He didn't have the battle art yet, but he did now possess all the components needed to create it.

Of course, it was not going to be easy. Even with all that knowledge stored in his mind, he would still have to spend a lot of time and effort and spill a lot of blood, both his own and that of his enemies, to turn the graceful dance of the beautiful slave girl into a deadly dance of steel.

It wasn't even certain that he would succeed.

But Sunny would be damned if he wasn't going to try.

Shadow Dance would become his personal battle art. He was going to make it happen.

As if echoing his last thought, the familiar voice of the Spell suddenly whispered into his ear.

When Sunny heard what she said, his eyes widened.

[You have received an Aspect Legacy, Shadow Dance.]

Sunny stared into the emptiness, stunned to his core by what the Spell had just whispered.

Aspect Legacy... did it really just say those words?

He gulped.

Aspect Legacy was something that every Aspect contained, but very few Awakened ever received. Unlike the Boon of the First Nightmare, and every Nightmare after that, as well as the reward Sleepers received after returning from the Dream Realm for the first time, each Aspect Legacy had a unique set of requirements that the owner of the Aspect had to meet to unlock it.

When they did, they were rewarded with a powerful relic. Usually, it was a Memory that synergized perfectly with their Aspect Abilities, or sometimes even an Echo.

Legacy clans weren't called that accidentally. While not every clan possessed an Aspect Legacy, most of them did. In fact, it was the acquisition of the Aspect Legacy that laid the foundation for the creation of many of these clans.

By now, some of the most powerful clans even had several.

But getting an Aspect Legacy was not an easy feat. Most of them were received by Saints, followed by Master, and only a few were won by mere Awakened.

Getting the Aspect Legacy while still being a Sleeper... that was simply unheard of.

'Just like getting a True Name during the First Nightmare, I guess.'

Sunny couldn't believe his luck. Of course, he worked bitterly hard to be able to grasp it. And yet, the magnitude of the harvest he reaped was utterly unbelievable.

However... why was his Aspect Legacy not a Memory, but a battle art?

That was really strange.

Not wasting any time, Sunny summoned the runes and hungrily searched for new ones.

...What he saw made him tremble.

Chapter 219: Relics of the Past

Right there in the glimmering field of familiar runes, in the cluster describing his Aspect, a new string of them appeared.

Aspect: [Shadow Slave].

Aspect Rank: Divine.

Aspect Abilities: [Shadow Control].

Aspect Legacy: [Shadow Dance].

As soon as Sunny concentrated on the Aspect Legacy, new runes shined to describe it.

Shadow Dance Description: [Once an elegant dance, now a deadly battle art. This mysterious style was created by the treacherous Lost From Light after witnessing a graceful slave dancing with her shadows. Who else could have taken something so beautiful and turned it into something so vile?]

Sunny coughed, trying hard not to think too much about the manner in which the Spell had described him.

'Again with this treacherous stuff... I'm not that treacherous, okay? So what if I lie, manipulate, and backstab people all the time. That's just being smart...'

However, what grabbed his attention was not the description itself, but what glimmered beneath it.

Shadow Dance Mastery Level: [0/7].

First Relic: Unearned.

Second Relic: Unearned.

Third Relic...

There were a total of seven lines of runes, each promising him a Legacy Relic once he achieved the corresponding level of mastery with his newly envisioned battle style.

Seven of them!

Not one, not even two or three. But seven.

Whole Legacy Clans were created around a single Legacy Relic. Sunny couldn't even imagine what he would be able to do with seven.

Start a family and turn it into the most powerful clan in the world? No, that would mean putting all his eggs into one basket. Better create several clans!

Right! Why start a family when you can start seven?

Wait, no... that didn't sound right...

Right?

Consumed by avarice, Sunny looked at the rising sun with an excited grin. This was great! This was incredible!

However, his excitement was short-lived.

'Yeah, right. I would have to get back to the real world first. And that's not going to happen...'

Turning his head slightly, he stared at the distant silhouette of the Crimson Spire and lost himself in thought.

A while later, Effie's voice brought him back to reality.

"Hey, doofus! Breakfast is ready. Why are spacing out and smiling like an idiot?"

Sunny answered without thinking.

"Just thinking about creating a Legacy Clan. Have you ever thought about creating a clan, huh, Effie?"

The robust huntress stared at him for a few seconds with a strange expression, and then grinned.

"...Is that an invitation?"

Still lost in thought, Sunny tilted his head and glanced at her astutely.

'Huh... not bad, not bad. The choice of a partner has to be of utmost importance when starting a Legacy Clan. Take Effie, for example. She is a very fearsome Awakened. Her Aspect is extravagant and powerful beyond belief. Plus, her physique is nothing short of divine. Any heir she gives birth to is bound to be both strong and gorgeous... a very suitable candidate, I guess...'

"...Huh, what? No, not an invitation. Just considering different options."

At that moment, Sunny suddenly realized that he had been unceremoniously ogling Effie up and down for a better half of a minute, and that her grin had long turned dangerous at some point.

The huntress stretched her neck and said lazily:

"I see. So you have chosen death..."

He blinked.

"No! Wait! I didn't mean it like that! I was just, you know, theorizing!"

The unruly huntress cracked her knuckles and smiled menacingly.

"Oh, so you were "theorizing" about me, huh? Do tell, do tell..."

"No, no! Wait! Stop! Sto..."

Surprisingly, Sunny survived.

...Barely.

Soon after that, they left the grandiose marble arch and continued their journey into the depths of the Labyrinth.

Before the expedition started, Nephis had told him that they had a fast and comparatively safe way to reach the southern edges of the Forgotten Shore — as much as anything could be safe in this cursed place. Without it, getting to their destination would have taken them months.

Now that they had left the Dark City, Sunny finally decided to satisfy his curiosity and asked what that mysterious method of traveling with incredible speed was. When he heard the answer, he just stared blankly at Changing Star for a few minutes, trying to guess if she was kidding or not.

She wasn't.

In the end, he didn't even ask any questions and just waved his hand dejectedly. There was no point.

If Nephis had come to know of this secret from Cassie's visions and believed that it was doable, then he did not have to worry. Too much. It's not like he could turn back now, anyway.

Plus, the expedition had shown itself to be extremely lucrative for him so far. Mere days after its start, he had already gotten plenty of shadow fragments and an Ascended Memory, not to mention making a breakthrough in his exploration of battle styles and earning an Aspect Legacy for his effort.

In any case, they had to travel about a week's worth of time south to get the chance to access that fast method of travel. The heights they were going to use on the way as shelters during the nights there were planned in advance with the help of the Forgotten Shore map Nephis had created.

To make sure that these shelters were really where the map showed and remove any possibility of ending up stranded in the middle of the Labyrinth with no way to escape the dark sea, she had even employed Kai during the week that Sunny had spent with Effie. The charming archer scouted the way ahead and confirmed that her map was correct.

Now, the only danger they really faced from the Forgotten Shore itself was that of a sudden storm. However, with a true oracle in the ranks of the cohort, this danger was dramatically diminished. Now that Cassie had grown into her powers and absorbed a lot of soul essence, she was often able to warn them in advance if something like that was going to happen.

...There were also the usual perils of the Labyrinth, of course.

And as they went deeper into its deadly maze, the situation slowly began to turn from bad to worse.

Chapter 220: So You're a Spider, So What?

As they ventured deeper into the southern reaches of the crimson Labyrinth, the situation slowly turned worse and worse.

The iron spiders that had been not too threatening to the cohort of powerful, experienced Dark City hunters at the start of it all were growing more and more deadly with each step of the way. Their numbers grew exponentially, becoming a real danger pretty soon. More and more often bigger and stronger monsters appeared at the head of the attacking beasts, bringing with them all sorts of problems.

What's worse, the spiderweb they used to trap their prey was changing, too. The metal wires from which it was weaved became so thin that it was at times almost impossible to notice it, and sharp enough to cut through armor and bone — while maintaining the resilience of superb steel.

The whole Labyrinth was covered in it, turning from crimson to dull grey.

The cohort bled much more because of the invisible webs than they did because of the spiders themselves. Of course, the iron spiders were cunning creatures, too. More often than not, they only attacked once one of the humans was caught in their nets, leading to a few really harrowing experiences for the members of Changing Star's party.

And there was a wide variety of other terrifying creatures waiting to ambush them in the twisting pathways of the crimson coral, too. What made them so dangerous was that the cohort didn't know anything about their anatomy and abilities. Every fight was a gamble, often resulting in one or several of them sustaining serious wounds.

There were three things that made the situation somewhat bearable.

The first one was Nephis and her healing flames. Although using the Aspect Ability took a toll on their leader, it was often worth it, especially if one of the members of the cohort received wounds that limited their mobility.

One thing was far more dangerous than any Nightmare Creature that lived in the Labyrinth, and it was not reaching safety before the torrent of black water flooded the Forgotten Shore, bringing inconceivable horrors with it. Thanks to Neph, they didn't have to worry about anyone slowing the cohort down.

The second reason, unexpectedly, was the iron spiders themselves. Because of the peculiar way they hunted, a lot of creatures found their deaths in the cutting embrace of the wire spiderwebs. Finding these eviscerated corpses or cocoons containing old carcasses became a common occurrence once the party invaded the depths of the spider territory.

Thanks to that, six humans were able to study and anticipate many of the monsters they had to face in this region of the Labyrinth. A lot of potentially deadly surprises had been avoided due to the cohort stumbling onto a corpse of a similar creature prior to fighting against a living one and spending some time to learn about its strengths and weaknesses.

The third reason was the Blood Arrow. In the hands of an experienced archer, it was almost as deadly as it would have been in the hands of an inexperienced one... the difference being that the latter would mostly be a danger to themselves, quickly turning into a bloodless husk.

The first time Kai had used it, Sunny experienced a disturbing feeling of shock. That time, they were facing a large group of iron spiders led by a much larger arachnid — the awakened monster of their tribe, similar in status to a carapace centurion.

These creatures were much heavier and more powerful, with thick plates of iron armor covering their bodies almost completely. Even Caster's enchanted sword had trouble cutting through their defenses. What's worse, due to the speed with which the wretched abominations moved, it was especially hard to catch them in a gap between the armor plates.

Sunny was facing two smaller iron spiders at once while the Stone Saint was butchering the third one. With his shadow observing what was happening behind his back, he didn't miss the moment when the cunning

awakened monster suddenly disengaged from Nephis and dashed into his direction, its mandibles moving in anticipation of tasting human flesh.

Calmly preparing to dodge, Sunny tensed his muscles... and narrowed his eyes.

Whistling over his shoulder, a menacing black arrow suddenly streaked through the air. Its shaft was made out of dark polished wood, with black feathers for fletching and a vicious white arrowhead that seemed to be cut from pale white bone, like a sharp fang of some terrible creature.

The arrow easily pierced the thick iron plate protecting the spider and tore deep into his body. Even though Kai messed up his shot a bit and hit the monster in its abdomen instead of the head, the results were nothing short of harrowing.

In the next moment, the awakened monster suddenly slowed down and staggered. Then, it tried to lunge forward once again, but ended up losing its balance and quickly falling to the ground. Its limbs moved slightly, quickly losing any form of cohesion.

Their movements grew slower and slower and then stopped. Beneath the iron plates, the spider's body grew taut and shriveled, like that of a mummy. Soon, it seemed completely... drained.

Sunny blinked, shaken by this disturbing image, and couldn't help but glance briefly at his forearm.

...If not for the Blood Weave, he might have ended up as a shriveled corpse, too.

He would have gone through with cutting off his arm and survived, most likely. But if he had been a couple of seconds too late...

'Better not to think about.'

Anyway, he was glad that the Blood Arrow was on their side now.

Not too far away from him, gliding through the air, Kai suddenly made a strange gasping sound. Sunny didn't know what it felt like to have your blood magically drained and then suddenly returned to your body, but he doubted that it was pleasant.

Also, there was this question... if Kai's blood was used to create the arrow and then returned to him — if he had hit his mark, of course — then... where did the blood drained from the prey went?

He wasn't sure that he wanted to know.

In any case, with Nightingale in possession of the morbid Ascended Memory, their battles with iron spiders and other inhabitants of the Labyrinth became a bit less perilous. The Blood Arrow did not have any enchantments that needed to be activated by manipulating soul essence, so the charming archer could use it to its full potential.

Although Sunny was still a bit bitter about having to give such a menacing weapon away, he was now more confident than ever that his decision was the right one.

...Just like that, six more days passed by. During this time, he didn't gain any new Memories, but managed to accumulate eighteen more shadow fragments, bringing his total to three hundred and forty. He was still not as strong physically as he had been before creating the Shadow Saint, but getting closer and closer.

In the evening of the sixth day, bloodied and exhausted, the cohort had finally approached the goal of the first leg of their expedition.

Looking at it, Sunny couldn't help but stop in his tracks.

His eyes slightly widened.

'Of course...'

Chapter 221: Zenith | Shadow Slave

In front of them, the ground was shattered, creating a titanic fracture. The canyon was so deep and vast that Sunny had to strain his eyes to see the other side of it. Crimson coral clung to its walls, spilling over the edge like a torrent of blood.

A long time ago, a graceful bridge of white stone connected the two sides of the canyon together. Now, however, it was broken, with only its base remaining in place.

Looking at the bridge, Sunny realized that there must have been an ancient road somewhere beneath their feet. It led directly to the main gates of the ancient city, moving across the colossal canyon by means of the miraculous bridge and passing beneath the grandiose arch of white marble.

Come to think of it, the headless knight, the Ashen Barrow, and the graceful woman whose hands had saved him twice were also situated in a straight line. Perhaps there was another road leading east, too.

However, this thought disappeared from his head as quickly as it had appeared. All his attention was drawn to the remnants of the stone bridge, where...

Stood another giant statue.

Right above the weathered ruins stood a colossal stone warrior. He was clad in an archaic cuirass, with a beautiful spear resting on his shoulder. The warrior was facing south, as though greeting the travelers who traveled on the road to reach the ancient city.

...Of course, his head was missing.

More than that, the whole statue was covered in vast sheets of dull grey spiderweb, as if dressed in a solemn burial shroud. Sunny shivered, afraid to imagine what kind of creature was capable of creating the thick metal cables of the web that encompassed the stone colossus.

Noticing his expression, Effie smiled.

"Scary, huh?"

Sunny gave her a nod, hoping against all hope that they would not have to find out the answer to his question.

For once, his hopes were not shattered to pieces.

The vivacious huntress sighed.

"I haven't seen it myself, but I heard stories of the creature that used to make its nest here. It was the mother of all these damnable spiders we've been dealing with for the past week. A huge menace of a Nightmare Creature, as big as a house and utterly deadly. Armored like a hover tank, too."

Sunny gulped and cast a sideways look at Nephis.

"What's a hover tank?"

Effie blinked a couple of times, then answered in an amused tone:

"Oh, right! You're a school dropout, I almost forgot. You've seen a PTV before, right? PTV stands for a "personal transport vehicle", as you know. I hope. Well, a tank is sort of like that, only much bigger and heavier, with thick armor and a kinetic or energy cannon installed on it. The government sometimes employs them to support Awakened when a Gate opens near populated areas."

Sunny tried to imagine such a vehicle and hazily remembered seeing something like this on the news when he was a kid. Mostly, these tanks Effie had described were shown opened like tin cans, with their crews pulled out and eaten by attacking monsters.

He shivered. Mundane people had no business fighting against Nightmare Creatures.

To be completely honest, even Awakened were had no business facing them. It's just that they had no other choice.

"...We're not going to try and kill that big spider, are we?"

Effie laughed.

"Actually, it's you lucky day. We won't be meeting the Spider Mommy. In fact, no one ever will. She's long dead."

Sunny sighed with relief and glanced at the huntress:

"Yeah, great. But how do you know?"

She shrugged.

"She was killed by the second ruler of the Bright Castle — before he went and got himself killed trying to conquer the Crimson Spire. The huntress who showed me the ropes when I arrived on the Forgotten Shore had actually been one of the members of his cohort once, if you can believe it. In fact, she was the one who dealt the finishing blow to that abomination."

Effie looked at the giant mass of spiderwebs and shook her head.

"It must have been one hell of a battle, huh? Anyway, I'm glad that she did. That's how she received the Zenith Shard, which I then inherited."

Sunny frowned.

"What exactly are you talking about?"

The huntress leaned on her beautiful bronze spear and patted its shaft.

"My spear. It's a tier-five Awakened Memory, so the big bad spider was an awakened tyrant, I guess. Can you imagine? All these creepy crawlers serving a sentient commander. Thank gods it's dead."

Sunny looked at her with a dubious expression.

"Why would that mentor of your gave away such a treasure?"

Effie was silent for a few moments, then smiled.

"Ah, we were kind of close. Plus, she had no idea how to use a spear. Sorcerers, am I right? In any case, she gave the Zenith Shard to me."

Despite her carefree tone, he could tell that that smile was fake. Effie did not let it show, but Sunny could tell that the death of this huntress whose name he didn't even know had met affected her more than she was telling.

Who knows. Since Effie's original cohort had perished in the catacombs, their corpses might still be somewhere there, in those cursed tunnels.

However, something else was on his mind.

Sunny furrowed his brow. Midnight Shard, Zenith Shard. Was there a connection? He didn't know.

There might have been. He had received the Midnight Shard from Nephis, who had gotten it after killing the Carapace Demon.

The Demon, even though it had been enthralled by the Soul Devourer, appeared as the leader of the Nightmare Creature in that region of the Labyrinth... just like the brood mother of the iron spiders had been.

Two headless statues, two powerful abominations, two Memories with similar names. Wasn't it a little bit too much to be a coincidence?

Glancing at Effie, he asked:

"Was your spear forged from a shard of a fallen star, by chance?"

Just as he said it, Cassie slightly turned her head, listening to their conversation. That small detail told Sunny everything he wanted to know.

The huntress raised her eyebrows.

"It was, at least according to its description. Who told you?"

A corner of Sunny's lips slightly curled upward.

"No one. I just guessed."

With that, he left Effie alone and walked forward.

It seemed as though he was right. There was some hidden meaning behind the names of these two Memories. Cassie seemed to know something about it, and that meant that Nephis did, too.

And yet, they chose to keep it from Sunny and the rest of the cohort.

He sighed.

'So this expedition is not as simple as it seems.'

Not that it ever seemed particularly simple, to begin with.

He had guessed a long time ago that Changing Star had some hidden motive to want to leave the Dark City, but now, his suspicions were as good as confirmed.

The smile disappeared from Sunny's face.

He didn't like being kept in the dark at all.

'Kept in the dark, huh. Oh, the irony...'

At that moment, his shadow reached the base of the giant statue. With a deep frown, Sunny summoned the Midnight Shard and glanced at Nephis, putting all needless thought aside.

"There's a nest ahead. We will have to destroy it to access the statue. Lots of spiders... some bigger ones, too."

She gave him a nod and turned to face the others.

"We need to clear the nest and climb the statue before the sun sets. Prepare for battle..."

Chapter 222: Clearing the Nest

A clear and melodic sound of a ringing bell reverberated through the air above the Labyrinth, alerting the monstrous spiders hiding in the enormous cocoon of grey webs that a new prey came knocking on their door.

Moments later, swift bodies clad in heavy plates of iron armor shot from beneath the grey spiderweb, moving through the steel wires with terrifying speed. There were enough Nightmare Creatures in that wave to obliterate anything that stood in their way... seemingly.

However, what stood in their way were two figures — one tall and boisterous, the other one on the shorter side and radiating a strange feeling of indifferent firmness.

They were Effie and the Stone Saint. Both held their shields raised, the tips of their weapons resting on their edges. As the huntress grinned, the Shadow silently struck the rim of her shield with the blade of her sword twice.

As if answering that call, a vicious black arrow suddenly appeared from somewhere above, hitting the leading spider right in one of its many eyes. The monster's legs buckled, and it fell to the ground, forcing those creatures that followed behind to either dash around or jump over the massive body.

A fraction of a second later, the wave of spiders crashed into the small shield wall. A deafening roar of iron striking against iron resounded under the grey skies of the Forgotten Shore like a thunderclap. Despite the furious force of the assault, Effie and the Stone Saint somehow held — at least for now.

As soon as the momentum of the iron spiders was slowed down a little, Nephis and Caster appeared out of nowhere and attacked the mass of repulsive creatures from the sides. At the same time, a stonelike sword and a beautiful bronze spear lashed out from behind the shields.

Black blood splashed into the air.

Meanwhile, Sunny softly landed on the ground behind the Nightmare Creatures and stealthily moved through the shadows, swiftly approaching them from the back. The Midnight Shard flashed, sending one of the spiders into the embrace of death.

[You have slain an awakened beast...]

Without listening to the Spell, Sunny used the precious moments before the enemy noticed his presence to wreck as much havoc as possible. His tachi moved twice more, severing several limbs and heavily wounding another abomination. After that, the spiders finally reacted to his treacherous attack...

'Not treacherous... just... smart!'

With Effie and the Stone Saint holding the front, Nephis and Caster attacking from the sides, and Sunny closing the trap from behind, the monstrous arachnids were now surrounded from all sides.

...Well, sort of.

Of course, a small group of dormant humans could never hope to truly surround this many superior Nightmare Creatures, not even with the help of a monster of their own. Trapped or not, as soon as the iron spiders had the time to react, they could easily overwhelm and tear them to pieces.

Especially Sunny, who was behind the line these vicious creatures and all alone. If the spiders decided to shift the focus of their attack, he would be dead in seconds.

As another black arrow hit one of the larger spiders in the abdomen, Sunny hissed and dove under a spider scythe, then thrust his sword forward, ruthlessly piercing the head of the beast through its open, salivating mouth.

[You have...]

With no time to tear the Midnight Shard from the spider's corps, Sunny let go of its hilt and jumped back, narrowly avoiding being crushed by another ironclad creature.

The few seconds of the advantage they had were coming to an end. A moment or two later, the spiders were bound to come to their senses. Even though the cohort had managed to kill ten or so in this short window of time, there were still enough of the deadly creatures to rip them to shreds.

Sunny didn't even have to look at Nephis to feel the shift in her movements. The silent understanding the two of them developed during their journey through the Labyrinth many months ago was still there, allowing them to cooperate perfectly without the need to use any words, as though they were two parts of the same whole.

In fact, despite the rift in their relationship, this bond was stronger than ever.

Perhaps because they understood each other so much better now... for better or for worse.

Ah, it was so exhilarating to fight side by side with Changing Star once again...

Just before the spiders were able to turn the tide of the battle in their favor, Effie and the Stone Saint — who was following Sunny's command — suddenly moved to the sides.

Nephis, Caster, and Sunny braced themselves.

Behind the improvised shield wall stood Cassie. She was holding a wooden staff in her hands, while an elegant rapier hovered in the air above her shoulder.

The tip of the rapier pointed directly at the spiders. As though following the direction of the Quiet Dancer's blade, Cassie moved her staff and activated its enchantment.

Immediately, a powerful gust of hurricane wind slammed into the mass of the Nightmare Creatures, sending several of them reeling and throwing clouds of dust into the air. Of course, it wasn't strong enough to truly throw these abominations off their balance or damage them in any way.

However, that wasn't the plan.

Spider kin of these creatures back on Earth had a uniquely powerful sense of hearing. Which was rather strange, considering that they had no organs that resembled ears at all. The truth of the matter was that spiders were able to feel the vibrations of sound waves.

They were also masterful architects, using the vibrations in the specially created threads weaved into their webs to sense the movements of their prey from afar.

These Nightmare Creatures were much the same. As the powerful wind threw dust into the air and made every wire of every surrounding spiderweb vibrate all at once, they were momentarily disoriented.

The members of the cohort were waiting for this exact moment. Instantly, they attacked with ferocious determination, spilling rivers of viscous black blood onto the ground. Sunny himself had already gotten his austere sword back, and now used its razor-sharp blade to gut the beast that had forced him to retreat a couple of seconds ago.

[You have slain...]

By the time the iron spiders came back to their senses, their numbers were significantly diminished.

...But there were still so many of them.

After that, the battlefield became consumed with chaos. There was no time for plans or tactics anymore. Every member of the cohort had to face off against multiple opponents, fighting with desperate resolve against enemies that surpassed them both in terms of personal power and numbers.

Only the Stone Saint was calm and indifferent, moving through the ranks of the iron spiders like a graceful incarnation of pure darkness.

The battle fell apart into several small pockets of fearsome violence. Kai was trying to support his companions from above, but with how intense the fighting got, he was having trouble finding the opportunities to take shots without risking hitting them.

He was too afraid to take a risk, knowing all too well how harrowing the effects of the Blood Arrow were. If even the Nightmare Creatures of higher rank were doomed to succumb to a torturous death after being wounded by the ghastly Memory, humans like them had no chance of surviving.

For now, people on the ground were on their own.

...Sunny was struggling against two ironclad abominations, gritting his teeth in exasperation. The damn bastards were too fast to reliably hit them in the gaps in armor and too damn powerful to face them directly. As the result, he was forced to constantly dance between the two of them, dodging the whirlwind of strikes that rained on him from all sides.

"Curses!"

Jumping back, he held the Midnight Shard with one hand and used another to throw the Prowling Thorn in the direction of one of the spiders. The creature easily dodged the kunai and continued its attack, threatening to slice Sunny's hand clean off.

He had no choice but to retreat once again.

...Behind the menacing beast, the throwing dagger continued to spin. A few moments later, it cut a smooth arch in the air and flew back, as if turning into a boomerang.

Sadly, just like the spiders back on Earth, these repulsive creatures had an almost absolute field of vision. The second spider simply moved its head down at the last moment without even bothering to turn it, dodging the heavy kunai that approached it from behind.

But Sunny was never trying to wound the Nightmare Creatures with the Prowling Thorn, to begin with. Instead, he wanted to let them taste their own medicine.

A moment later, the invisible string of his kunai drew taut, wrapped around two massive bodies. Just like prey used to be caught in their webs, the iron spiders were now caught by the invisible string of the Prowling Thorn, tripping over it and crashing into each other.

Sunny dashed forward and let the Midnight Shard sing. The graceful blade flashed twice, sending two ugly spider heads spinning into the air.

[You have slain an awakened beast, Iron Spider.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Kicking one of the heads away, Sunny swiftly glanced around, searching for a new enemy.

But there were none.

[...You have slain an awakened beast, Iron Spider.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

[You have received a Memory.]

The gargantuan cocoon of steel spiderwebs was empty. Corpses of its previous inhabitants littered the ground, oozing with black blood.

The cohort had cleared the entire nest full of Awakened abominations.

No matter how incredible, this was the undeniable truth.

They had won.

Chapter 223: Natural Selection | Shadow Slave

The danger was gone, so Sunny allowed himself to tiredly kneel on the ground, his breathing heavy and laborious. The strenuous battle against the host of spiders had not lasted long, but he was utterly exhausted. The intensity of these perilous minutes was enough to bring anyone down to their knees.

'Too weak. I am still too weak.'

With a heavy sigh, he summoned the runes and glanced at the number of shadow fragments.

Shadow Fragments: [362/1000].

Not bad. Clearing the nest had given him twenty-two fragments — ten for the five iron spiders he had killed himself, and another twelve for those slain by the Shadow Saint.

With the taciturn monster serving as his murderous pet, the speed with which Sunny was able to accumulate power was twice as fast, at least. If things continued like this, the Stone Saint was going to return his investment of a hundred shadow fragments in no time.

'If I live long enough.'

With a grimace, Sunny dismissed the Midnight Shard and slowly got up. The sun was already rolling down toward the horizon, so they had to hurry with collecting soul shards from the corpses of the iron spiders.

There were a lot of corpses...

Cutting one of the beasts open with the Prowling Thorn, Sunny struggled with the idea that they had eviscerated this many Nightmare Creatures. Of course, he had expected this much. After all, Nephis and Sunny had been able to fight against two or three carapace scavengers back when it was

only the two of them. Both of them were much weaker, less experienced, and barely equipped with Memories back then, too.

Now that they had spent seven whole months in the Dream Realm — many times more than most Sleepers ever had to — and tempered themselves against the perilous hellscape of the Forgotten Shore, both their skill and level of power had dramatically increased.

Add the fact that there were two other powerhouses fighting alongside them, as well as Nightingale and the menacing Stone Saint, and the outcome of the battle ceased to be that surprising.

And yet, observing the carnage that they had left if their wake still made Sunny doubt his eyes.

These were Awakened Nightmare Creatures, still.

The real reason why the cohort had won did not lie in the individual prowess of its members, but in their ability to cooperate and control the battlefield. The iron spiders were powerful and deadly, but at the end of the day, they were still mindless beasts. That's why they had allowed themselves to be surrounded and trapped.

Had they been commanded by a creature of a higher Class, one that was as cunning and smart as the humans it faced, things would have turned out very differently.

Sunny sighed.

Come to think of it, the Labyrinth was a curious place. It teemed with abominable creatures of all kinds, but almost all of them were of the mindless variety. The only two exceptions he knew about were the Carapace Demon and the Spider Matriarch, who had been either a devil or a tyrant.

ρ□□□□ □□□□□ Perhaps it was just the nature of this place. Nothing too big and strong could escape from the flood of black water that drowned the world every night. Only comparatively small monsters were able to run

away or hide — both from the dark sea itself and from the hungry terrors that inhabited it.

These monsters were an almost insurmountable threat to those unfortunate young people who were sent to this forsaken hell by the Spell, but by the standards of the Forgotten Shore itself, they were nothing but insects.

A horde of parasites who fed on the crumbs left behind by the true masters of this place. pa□□a □□□□□

'What a depressing thought.'

This notion poured cold water on Sunny's pride over their achievement.

'Well. Whatever...'

Soon, they were done with the gruesome job of fishing out the soul shards out of the dead spiders. While Nephis was dividing the spoils among the members of the cohort, Sunny used the chance to dive into his Soul Sea and inspect the Memory he had received during the battle.

It turned out to be a cloak weaved from spider silk. Judging from the description, the cloak could provide him with a small amount of protection against physical attacks, simple by virtue of being very hard to piece.

Without thinking too much, Sunny fed the cloak to the Stone Saint. It was just a tier-one Memory, so no amount of protection it could provide would be of any help in this damned place. He would also rather kill himself than go into a battle while wearing a cloak. There were easier and less painful ways to die.

Plus, it was white. Didn't exactly go along with the dark grey fabric of the Puppeteer's Shard, not to mention being a hindrance to anything having to do with stealth.

The Stone Saint absorbed another shadow fragment, at least.

Receiving his share of the soul shards and entrusting them to Effie, who had more than enough space in her enchanted bag, Sunny glanced at Nephis.

Changing Star was looking at the sun, calculating something in her head. After a few moments, she sighed and said:

"We still have some time. Let's explore the nest before ascending the statue."

Sunny grinned.

As an amateur explorer, this was exactly what he wanted to hear.

The nest was formed by endless wires of the strange metal web and resembled a vast sphere. It was built around one of the legs of the stone colossus, effectively blocking the path to the bridge.

The entrance was situated high above the ground, and extremely wide. Looking at the diameter of that hole gave Sunny an understanding of just how big the Spider Matriarch had been.

He shivered. The second lord of the Castle had been a very powerful individual. Sunny didn't even want to imagine what the battle with the giant arachnid must have looked like.

Inside, it was dark and damp. Drops of black water were falling from above, creating an ominous melody.

Peering into the darkness, Sunny suddenly stumbled and froze for a moment.

This... he didn't expect.

Chapter 224: Pyre | Shadow Slave

Inside the giant nest of spiderwebs, a desiccated corpse of the colossal Matriarch lay shriveled on the floor, its iron carapace shattered by some devastating blow. The creature was long dead, but the sight of it was still terrifying.

The vast abdomen of the brood mother, however, appeared to have been severed much later than her fatal battle against the Lord of the Bright Castle. It almost looked as if it was... torn apart from within. Inside the terrifying wound, Sunny noticed the shattered remnants of five giant, metallic eggs.

The size of them was about the same as that of the five monstrous Fallen Beasts that had destroyed the original Stone Saint and her brethren back in the Dark City.

'So... that was where they came from.'

Looking away with a shiver, Sunny noticed numerous cocoons of spiderwebs attached to the walls of the nest all around the dead Matriarch. Inside them, withered carcasses of Nightmare Creatures of all shapes and sizes were preserved in a strangely good condition.

This was a true museum of terror.

The Nightmare Creatures appeared as though they were kept alive inside the cocoons for a long, long time before finally succumbing to death and turning into mummified corpses. Perhaps the abominable spiders stored them there for later consumption.

Or... not.

Noticing a few cocoons that had been broken open and what was inside of them, Sunny had to try hard to stop himself from vomiting.

The iron spiders did not use the monsters caught in the cocoons for food.

...They used them as incubators.

The creatures in the broken cocoons had been devoured from within. A few of them still had hundreds of small, moist eggs embedded into their flesh, with embryonic spiderlings moving weakly behind the slightly transparent shells.

'Curse... it all...'

Damn these spiders, damn the Labyrinth, damn the Forgotten Shore... and especially damn the damned Nightmare Spell that had brought him here. Sunny suddenly felt tired of this long, feverish, neverending nightmare he had found himself in.

But the worse was still to come.

He was the first to notice it. With a dark grimace suddenly appearing on his face, Sunny called out to his companions. Then, he led them deeper into the nest, where, attached to the wall, hung a cocoon that was different from all the others.

Because this one hid a rough silhouette of a human body.

The six of them stood somberly around the cocoon, each consumed by their own dark thoughts. Finally, Nephis turned her head to Caster and said:

"Can you sword cut it open?"

With a short nod, the proud Legacy summoned the enchanted jian and took a step forward. Approaching the cocoon, he stopped and hesitated for a few moments.

"Be careful."

Glancing back at Changing Star, Caster lingered for a second, and then faced the cocoon with grim determination written on his face. As ghostly green light emanated from the blade of his sword, he swung it with the graceful precision of an expert swordsman.

The tip of the jian cut through the metal wires of the cocoon, splitting it open. A shriveled human body fell to the floor, making the Legacy jump back.

Nephis, Caster, and Sunny stared at it, their faces pale and full of ghastly resentment. Then, Sunny bent over and emptied the contents of his stomach.

...This was just too much.

The young man whose corpse they found in this harrowing place did not die an easy death. In fact, being eaten alive from the inside by a hundred of tiny Nightmare Creatures was probably the worst fate imaginable. At least Sunny couldn't think of anything worse.

But even worse still, he recognized the dead Sleeper.

His face was strangely intact, with an expression of horrifying agony frozen on it forever. Despite the overall condition of the corpse, Sunny knew who it was just from one look.pa□□a □□□□□

It was the young man who had attended the Academy with them, the one who had called him a shorty when Sunny first approached Caster to create the impression that he was a boastful lunatic.

Looking at their condition, Effie frowned:

"Did you guys know him?"

After a few moments of silence, Caster slowly nodded.

"Yes. His name is... his name was Stephen. He was the youngest heir of the Pandavar clan.

'Stephen...'

Sunny had not even bothered to learn the name of this arrogant young man back when they were preparing to venture into the Dream Realm at the Academy. In fact, he had really disliked him, and for a good reason.

ρ□□□□ □□□□□ But looking at the hideous, terrifying corpse in front of him, he had forgotten all about it. Sunny would never wish this fate on anyone, let alone one of his fellow students.

Slowly, a solemn mood took overtook the cohort. They had already known that the other three Sleepers sent to the Forgotten Shore this year never made it to the Dark City, which meant that they had perished somewhere in the Labyrinth. However, finding one of them served as a stark reminder of how fragile their own lives were.

Who knew what would happen to them in the future? If not today, death could be waiting for them tomorrow. Perhaps years from now, it would be their corpses that someone would stumble upon by accident.

Some time later, Nephis gritted her teeth and turned away. Then, she said, her voice suppressed and hollow:

"We need to leave. The sun is setting."

Her words broke the silence and brought everyone back from their grim reveries. Caster lingered for a few minutes, then spoke in a hesitant tone:

"Aren't we... aren't we going to bury him?"

Changing Star shook her head.

"There's not enough time. I also don't want anyone touching the bodies infected with these eggs. It's too dangerous."

The members of the cohort looked at each other. No one had a reasonable objection, but it felt wrong to just leave their fellow human here.

Finally, Nephis sighed. A complicated expression appeared on her face, and then she said:

"...Alright. Go. I'll catch up with you guys later."

Sunny stared at her for a few moments, and then slowly turned away. One after another, the five of them glanced at Changing Star and left, leaving her

alone with the dead young man and numerous cocoons, each hiding a slain Nightmare Creatures.

As soon as the last member of the cohort climbed out of the nest, a beam of pure radiance suddenly shot from the dark hole of its entrance, followed by a wave of scorching heat. The purifying fire unleashed by Changing Star engulfed the remains of their fellow student and then spread to the numerous cocoons, the Nightmare Creatures inside of them, and even the corpse of the Spider Matriarch herself.

The insides of the nest turned into an incandescent, incinerating furnace. Everything inside of it was doomed to be annihilated and turn to ashes.

A few minutes later, the whole structure was consumed by furious white flames.

Nephis had escaped the burning nest shortly after the rest of her cohort, her face pale and tired.

Leaving the grandiose funeral pyre behind, they began ascending the statue of the ancient warrior.

The night was approaching.

Chapter 225: On The Shoulders Of Giants

Once they climbed all the way to the broad shoulders of the statue and found a suitable place to make camp, everyone looked down without having to say anything.

Far below them, the giant nest was still aflame. The cables that constituted it were melting and turning into rivers of liquid metal, flowing down from the edges into the vast abyss of the canyon.

The turbulent black waters were rising from below to meet them. When the two streams met — one lightless, the other incandescent — billowing columns of hot vapor shot into the air. For a few moments, it seemed as though light and darkness were on equal footing.

But then the cursed sea rose from the depths of the canyon in a surge and washed away the brightness of melting iron away. The flood of blackness crashed into the burning nest, dousing it.

A minute or so later, the white flames were gone. The surface of the dark sea continued to rise, as though nothing had ever happened.

Sunny sighed and turned to Nephis.

Now that they had reached their goal, it was time to face the real danger. With a grim expression on his face, he asked:

"So... now what?"

He knew the general concept of how she was planning to reach the southern edges of the Forgotten Shore in a short time, but not the details.

Changing Star glanced at him, lingered for a moment, and then said:

"We arrived at the canyon faster than I expected. There are still two days left before we can act. So, make yourself at home. We'll rest tomorrow and start preparing for it the next day."

Sunny smiled.

Rest... that sounded swell.

Plus, he wasn't really looking forward to making use of the "fast and comparatively safe" method of traveling through the Labyrinth that Nephis had talked about.

In fact, he would rather never have to use it at all.

Just like that, the cohort found itself with nothing to do for the next two days. Before leaving the Dark City, Changing Star had anticipated that various things could slow them down and padded the schedule of the expedition with extra time.

Who knew that they would actually make it to the broken bridge so fast?

In any case, Sunny wasn't complaining. He had a lot to do and think about.

For example, the mysterious connection between his tachi, Effie's spear, and the headless statues that stood around the Forgotten Shore.

The statues represented the seven valiant heroes that had made an oath to return light to this cursed land thousands of years ago. Sunny had seen three of them by now: the knight, the graceful woman, and now this mighty warrior.

Did every statue have a connection with a specific Memory? If so, what was that connection and why was Nephis so reluctant to share this information with everyone? pa□□a □□□□□

Well... it wasn't like he and Changing Star were very close now. Sunny had drawn a clear line to denote the nature of their relationship himself. He insisted that he was not a true member of the cohort, but merely a hired specialist.

Why would she share her secret with him?

This was a logical conclusion, but Sunny couldn't help but feel a bit resentful.

Despite the fact that he was her first partner, now, the situation had changed. Nephis had other people to rely on... like Caster.

So why would she say that Sunny was the only person she trusted on the Forgotten Shore except for Cassie, and then hide her technique from Caster?

ρ□□□□ □□□□□ Everything felt so complicated.

In any case, there was an invisible line drawn between the core members of the hunting party and the outsiders — Sunny and Kai.

No one consciously avoided them, but it was clear that the line existed. When all was said and done, the four true members of the cohort preferred each other's company. That's why Sunny and Kai ended up spending a lot of time together, chatting about this and that and generally having a nice time.

Honestly, Sunny couldn't complain. As far as companions went, the charming archer was not the worst option.

Plus, their conversations were extremely entertaining.

Kai had a lot of fun stories about his life as a celebrity, while Sunny had plenty of macabre anecdotes about his life in the outskirts.

Their life experiences were so vastly different that it was almost as if they were from different worlds. As a result, both felt like they were listening to fictional stories about some strange and fantastical land that they had never heard about before.

Sunny spent the rest of his time training with the sword, trying to turn Shadow Dance from an ethereal concept into a practical set of core principles. The progress was painfully slow, but now there was progress, at least.

He was having so much trouble because his chosen battle style was so strange and elusive. Unlike most styles, which started with certain movements and steps, this one was supposed to imitate any movement and any step instead of introducing its own.

So it was more about the state of mind and the flexibility of his physical behavior. Sunny had to create a set of training exercises that would allow his body and muscle memory to become capable of adapting to any style and turn pliable like a shadow.

On the first day of trying, his whole body ached. Despite his incredible physical shape and experience with tough training, Sunny ended up straining the muscles that he didn't even know he had, and force those that he did know about to behave in a way that was utterly different from what they were used to.

Actually, his previous training was even detrimental to the whole process. He had to make himself unlearn a lot of things to allow for this strange style to take root in his very bones. Thankfully, the foundation of his technique was Changing Star's flowing style, which itself was designed for maximum adaptability.

If Sunny learned another style or was further into mastering any existing technique, this would have been ten times harder, if not impossible.

...Needless to say, his exercises were in no way similar to the beautiful and graceful dance he had seen in his dream. In fact, from the side, Sunny must have looked as though he was having a seizure. He caught more than one amused stare while practicing.

It didn't matter.

The only thing that mattered was that he was slowly pushing himself toward mastering the basics of Shadow Dance... and, hopefully, receiving his first Relic.

Chapter 226: The Fool | Shadow Slave

On the evening of the first of the two days that they had at their disposal, Sunny climbed all the way to the highest point of the statue and sat there alone, looking at the setting sun.

He felt as though he had to find a sense of balance that he had lost at some point along the way. Not because he missed it, but because he was going to need that balance to remain firm and steady when the moment of truth came.

If he was right about the future, then this was probably the last day of peace he would experience until this whole thing was over. Not only the expedition...

But all of it.

Looking back, his behavior in these past few months was highly erratic. Where were the cold rationality and ruthlessness that saved him so many times in the past? The caution and devious cunning that allowed him to survive the First Nightmare? He had not been acting like himself for a long time.

Yes, his mental state had suffered greatly because of everything that had happened. But was it the only reason?

Come to think of it...

The first blow dealt to him was the bitter revelation that there was no Gateway in the Bright Castle. After everything that Sunny had endured to make it to the Dark City, the crushing intensity of their journey through the Labyrinth, the diabolical trap of the Soul Devourer and their escape from it, the cold and harrowing night of traversing the dark sea... all of it turned out to have been for nothing.

Not only were they not rewarded for their efforts, but all of their hopes were mercilessly destroyed and obliterated instead.

This alone was enough to drive a person mad.

Then came the feeling of alienation he felt while living with Nephis, Cassie, and all the newcomers in the outer settlement. Instead of finding support and solace in the company of his friends, Sunny fell into his old habit. Unconsciously, he turned himself into an outcast to prevent anyone from making him one.

This was the most noticeable, but not the only instance of him regressing to his old self. After fighting so hard to change and grow, Sunny ended up abandoning most of the lessons he had learned after becoming infected by the Nightmare Spell.

He was almost like an addict relapsing after a few days of sobriety and giving up completely because of this one small mistake.

But who could blame him?

Sunny was already shaking under the pressure of the situation. One little push, and he would fall under its weight.

In the end, it was not one, but three blows that shattered him completely. As though the world wanted to make sure that he was truly broken.

First was the terrible epiphany of what Cassie's vision really meant. Almost instantly after that, while Sunny was still reeling, came the fatal mistake in the conversation with Harper and the brutal murder that followed. And if that was not enough, the person he relied on the most to keep his sanity in this cursed place, Nephis, made it impossible for him to trust her any longer.

Anyone would have collapsed under that weight. And yet Sunny managed to keep his balance, even if just barely.

The final straw that finally broke him was the excruciating, neverending sea of torturous pain he suffered after being mortally wounded by the Black Knight.

After that, Sunny had relinquished all pretense of having control.

And now here he was. Playing the fool, acting like a fool, and fooling around with Kai and Effie. Wasn't it fun? Wasn't it easy?

Yes, his mental state wasn't great.

But it was also very convenient to blame everything on this condition. The truth of it...

The truth of it was that Sunny did not try to reign himself in at all. In fact, he welcomed this madness. Being a bit crazy was comforting, simple, and safe.pa□□a □□□□□

It protected him from having to look at the heartbreaking truth and remember it. Sunny needed the shield of madness to save himself from the bottomless despair that threatened to destroy him completely.

So what if he was prone to act recklessly in this state? So what if he made mistakes here and there and took unnecessary risks? Anything was better than having to face that despair.

Just like Nephis had said, one had to become a little insane to survive in the world that had gone mad.

...And yet, Sunny knew that what he was doing was nothing but hiding his head in the sand.

And now that the end was approaching, he had to stop hiding from the truth. He had to admit and endure it.

This was the only way for him to survive.

...As the sun disappeared behind the horizon and the absolute darkness drowned the Forgotten Shore, he sighed deeply and whispered:

"Alright. Alright. It's time to wake up."

The next day, six humans were standing at the edge of the vast canyon as the twilight of dusk drowned the world in shadows. Far below them, the black waters of the cursed sea were raging, rising from the depths in a terrifying, obliterating wave.

In a few minutes, all light was going to be completely gone. And then, the flood of darkness would wash over the world, destroying anyone left standing in its path.

...And yet, the humans were not rushing to get away. Instead, they just stood there and waited.

Looking down into the canyon, Sunny gritted his teeth and shivered. Then, he glanced at Nephis and licked his dry lips.

"Are you sure about this?"

Changing Star did not spare him a look and simply nodded. Despite the fact that the rising black water was quickly approaching them, her face was calm and composed.

A moment later, the last vestiges of sunlight disappeared, leaving them in utter darkness. The silence that surrounded them was broken only by the sound of waves rushing against the walls of the canyon.

Getting closer and closer.

ρ□□□□ □□□□□ "Prepare yourselves."

Sunny sighed.

'Here we go.'

Suddenly, a blinding burst of white light pierced the darkness. Holding the incandescent sword in her hand, Nephis closed her shining eyes for a second...

And then raised the sword high above her head, as if calling the monsters of the depths to come take her.

Chapter 227: Comparatively Safe | Shadow Slave

The embrace of impenetrable darkness was broken by the furious white light of Changing Star's incandescent sword. Illuminated by it, six people were standing on the shore of a raging river. Their faces were pale and grim.

The canyon had disappeared, consumed by the rising surge of the black water. Now, the cursed sea was flowing over its edges, ready to swell and flood the narrow passages of the great Labyrinth in an unstoppable wave.

Sunny felt cold water wash over his feet and shivered. The rest of the cohort reacted exactly the same — even Kai, who could escape into the lightless skies at any moment, seemed to be deeply unnerved by the closeness of the encroaching sea.

Among the six of them, only three had truly experienced the perils of this dark abyss. They knew that the real dread came not from the sea itself, but from the terrors that hid in its cursed depths.

Like the host of the of whispering voices that they had heard beneath the branches of the Soul Tree.

Or the gargantuan creature that had almost cost Nephis her life.

However, Sunny was not going to make a remark to educate the rest of the cohort. After all, what they were trying to do right now was to summon one of these terrors from below.

One that was different from all the others.

"Sunny?"

Peering into the darkness, he lingered.

"I don't see anything... yet."

The water was already to his shins and rising swiftly. Sunny grimaced and struggled with the desire to turn around and run away without looking back.

If he was fast enough... if he was lucky enough... he could still make it to the giant statue before the torrent of darkness drowned him under its crushing weight.

Instead, Sunny glanced at Nephis and Cassie.

The blind girl had glimpsed this secret of the Forgotten Shore in her visions and shared it with Changing Star. Changing Star had devised a plan to make use of it.

Both of them were confident that they were going to succeed. So, he was going to be confident, too.

Sunny didn't fully trust either of his former companions, not anymore. But he trusted their judgment.

...Just as that thought appeared in his mind, there was a subtle movement at the edges of his vision. Turning his head, Sunny stared into the darkness... and trembled.

"...It's here."

Out there in the distance, a massive shape was moving through the waves, attracted by the light of Changing Star's incandescent blade. The sea seethed and swirled around it, the black mass of water easily pushed away by the approaching creature.

Nephis gritted her teeth and somehow made her flames burn even brighter, forcing the darkness to retreat another dozen steps.

"Get ready!"

A few moments later, the furious sounds of a massive body moving through the dark water reached their ears. The creature was a true giant, easily towering above the waves even though it was walking on the bottom of the canyon.

...Well, no surprise.

Full of terror and awe, Sunny watched as the thing they were waiting for came closer. Soon, he could discern the general shape of it.

Two hills that rose above water were its shoulders. And right between them, where the head should have been...

There was nothing but emptiness.

There were seven headless statues on the Forgotten Shore, but only six marks on the map created by Nephis. Not because she had failed to learn of the seventh one...

But because the seventh statue never stayed in one place for too long.

And now, that stone colossus was walking through the flooded canyon, his shoulder scraping against one of its walls. The wide chest of the headless giant pushed the water away, creating whirlpools in his wake.

Raising one colossal arm, the statue easily destroyed the protruding remnants of the ancient bridge that got in its way. The debris rained into the black waves, disappearing into them without a trace.

This... this was their fast and safe — comparatively — method of traveling to the edges of the Forgotten Shore.

'Truly insane,' Sunny thought, stunned by the sheer scale of everything that was happening.

Come to think of it, it was really ironic. The next day after he had decided to return to some semblance of sanity, something this crazy was about to transpire.

It was as though the whole world was mocking him.

Shaking his head, Sunny turned to the cohort and yelled:

"He's coming!"

The black water was already to their knees. The members of the cohort tensed and prepared themselves for what was about to come.

They only had one chance to do this. Failure meant death.

A few moments later, the massive shape of the stone colossus entered the circle of light created by Nephis. Its shoulders rose above the waves, close enough to the now invisible shore of the flooded canyon for them to see every tiny crack on the surface of the weathered stone.

Now wasting any time, Changing Star ran forward and jumped. A moment later, the blade of her sword hit the surface of the statue and slid deep into it, as if melting the ancient stone. Using the sword as purchase, Nephis started to climb to the giant's shoulder.

The other members of the cohort were following closely behind her. Kai was carrying Cassie in his arms, flying to the top of the colossus with no problem at all. Caster seemed to simply disappear and appear a moment later on the giant's shoulder, standing side by side with Changing Star.

...Only Sunny was having trouble. With him not being very tall and the water level rising with each second, he found it hard to gain enough momentum for a proper jump.

'Damn... how irritating...'

However, before he could come up with a solution, Effie simply grabbed him by the collar... and tossed Sunny into the air.

'W—what?!'

For a few short moments, Sunny was flying. All he could hear was wind whistling in his ears.

Then, he landed on top of the giant statue, rolled, and barely prevented himself from falling back into the cold embrace of the dark sea. Before he could even stand up, the mighty huntress landed near him and grinned.

"Such a light..."

However, before she could finish the phrase, the stone colossus moved, making everyone stumble and fall.

Leaving the ruins of the bridge behind, he turned around and indifferently began walking away from it.

He was walking south.

Chapter 228: Crossing the Canyon

The stone colossus wandered the Forgotten Shore aimlessly for thousands of years. Cassie did not know what power had brought him to life, nor what he was searching for in the depths of the dark sea.

She had seen a vision of the headless giant passing the ruins of the ancient bridge on a certain day and then traveling south to the very edges of this desolate land. She also knew that the leader of the cohort that had conquered the Bright Castle pursued the seventh statue across the Labyrinth for a long time before leaving on his doomed journey.

His reasons for doing so were, presumably, unknown.

Sunny wasn't sure that the blind girl had told him the whole truth about the wandering colossus. In fact, he was certain that there was a deeper layer of secrets surrounding the seven ancient statues and their importance to the riddle of the Forgotten Shore.

However, he was in no hurry to hunt these secrets down. Sunny knew that all three of them — Nephis, Cassie, and himself — were bound together to this cursed place. The strings of fate were wrapped around them tightly, stretching far into the future, where the final revelations waited. He was going to learn the truth sooner or later.

Until then, Sunny was content knowing no more than he needed to know.

...The stone giant walked across the dark sea, cutting its surface with his wide chest. The six humans were gathered on the circular platform of his severed neck, pressing themselves against the swaying stone. The cold water was spraying into their faces and the furious winds were threatening to throw them off the moving statue into the deadly waves below.

Nephis had long extinguished her flames, so they were surrounded by absolute darkness. Sunny was the only one who could see what was happening around them, so his role was to serve as the eyes of the cohort.

Using the strength of the shadow to hold onto the slippery stones, he looked forward with a grim expression on his face.

Currently, there was only one thought on his mind.

Were they going to make it in time?

The colossus was swiftly approaching the other side of the canyon. Sunny could identify it by the remnants of the ancient bridge that were still above the turbulent black waves. However, the water level was rising much faster.

"Sunny?!"

Looking toward Effie, who called out his name, he lingered for a few moments and then yelled:

"Prepare yourself! We're going to be underwater for a couple of minutes, at least!"

A chorus of curses served as the answer.

Unseen by anyone, Sunny smiled darkly.

This was going to be his second time diving into the dark sea. Wasn't this how Gunlaug had begun his journey to the throne of the Dark City?

Maybe Sunny would be a king himself, one day.

"...Now!"

The black water rose higher and higher. The shoulders of the giant were already submerged in its lightless depths. The circular platform was going to be next.

They were so close to the shore...

As the stone colossus moved across the bottom of the canyon, the platform rose and fell. After another fall, it was finally lost beneath the waves.

The cold, salty water crashed into them and then swallowed the entire world. The members of the cohort desperately held onto the cracks in the stone, trying to prevent themselves from being washed away by the raging current.

No one would be able to save them if they were.

Sunny closed his eyes, knowing that he would not be able to see anything through the impenetrable darkness of the cursed sea. Instead, he relied on his Shadow Sense, hoping that it was going to help him feel if something approached them from the depths.

Now, all Sunny had to do was hold tight and hope that the headless giant would reach the shore of the canyon before he ran out of breath.

Thankfully, everyone present was strong and powerful. Their physical form was either at the pinnacle of human ability or slightly above it. Several minutes underwater were not going to kill them... most likely.

Placating himself with this thought, Sunny waited, and waited, and waited, struggling against the terrible current with all his strength. At some point, he thought that he sensed an unclear shape swim close to the walking statue, but then the sensation disappeared.

'Any second now... any second...'

But the relief he was so desperately waiting for was not coming for far longer than Sunny had expected. Soon, his lungs began to burn, and his muscles began to spasm.

'Damnation...'

If he was having trouble, then others must have been in far worse shape. After all, oxygen traveled through human bodies with blood, and their blood had not been altered and comprehensively enhanced by the forbidden legacy of the mysterious Weaver.

Just as he thought so, Sunny felt one of the six shadows slipping from the circular platform.

It was Kai...

'Crap!'

Fortunately, before the colossus plunged into the dark depths, the charming archer had been worried about Cassie and tied himself to her with the help of the golden rope. Surprisingly, the blind girl turned out to be more resilient than him in the end. Now, she was holding both of their weights, desperately grabbing onto a narrow crack in the ancient stone.

Kai's unconscious body was floating a few meters behind her. He was safe, for now.

But how long would Cassie herself be able to hold on?

...When Sunny felt his mind weakening, his body was suddenly slammed into the platform with tremendous force.

The stone giant was climbing out of the canyon. His massive hands grabbed onto the edge of it, and with one devastating pull, the colossus threw himself upward.

'Ugh... curse it!'

Sunny felt as though he was aboard the worst amusement ride in human history. His bones groaned, being pressed down upon by an invisible weight.

A few moments of this torture, and they were above water once again.

Desperately grasping for air, Sunny inhaled several times and then weakly looked at the unconscious form of Kai. Crawling toward the archer, he grabbed him and dragged the body back to the rest of the group.

Entrusting him to Cassie, Sunny looked down at the dark water below... and suddenly growled in a low voice.

Turning her head, Nephis asked with a deep frown on her pale face:

"Sunny? What is it?"

Looking at the torso of the giant statue, he gritted his teeth and lingered for a few moments before answering.

Then, in a voice that was dreadfully grim, Sunny said:

"...We have a passenger."

Chapter 229: The Passenger | Shadow Slave

The colossus rose from beneath the turbulent waves, rivers of black water streaming down his stone body. Now that the walking statue had climbed out of the canyon, the cursed sea was barely up to its abdomen... for the moment.

Once the dark waters reached higher, the giant would be submerged in them up to his shoulders once again.

Sunny had to get rid of the unwelcomed passenger until then.

Far below, flattened against the chest of the colossus, a strange creature had attached itself to the ancient statue. It looked like a cross between a translucent jellyfish and an eel. However, Sunny could see a deformed skeleton of a giant humanoid being trapped within the transparent flesh of the repulsive abomination.

P AN DA-NO VEL. COM He shivered.

Compared to the stone giant, the eel looked rather small... however, this was just an illusion. Really, the creature was as large as a train. Its jaws were full of sharp fangs and wide enough to swallow a human whole.

'Curses.'

If there was one good thing about the situation, it was that the eel did not seem to be a Corrupted Nightmare Creature, but merely a Fallen one. Perhaps it survived in the cursed sea by attaching itself to the true terrors of the depths and feeding off the remains of their prey.

As soon as Nephis spoke, Sunny noticed long feelers of the creature tremble and move, as though reacting to the sudden sound. The eel turned its head slightly in their direction.

When he answered, the feelers rippled once again, and the monstrosity turned its head once more, this time staring directly at Sunny.

'Crap...'

A moment later, translucent tentacles appeared from beneath the abomination's body and shot up, finding cracks in the weathered stone and pulling it toward the neck of the colossus.

...Where the cohort was.

Changing Star must have felt something, because tiny white sparks suddenly ignited in the depths of her eyes.

Sunny put a hand on her shoulder and shook his head.

"Don't."

Stone giant or not, lighting a beacon in the middle of the cursed sea was not the best of ideas. Now that it had escaped the confines of the canyon, the real horrors were out and about. Just like the cohort had discussed before, light was their last resort, something they would summon only if the moment came where there was no other choice but for all of them to fight.

And whether Sunny liked it or not, that moment was not upon them yet.

With a reluctant scowl, he turned away and said:

"I'll handle it."

...The giant eel was his problem to solve.

'Yeah, that's great and all. But how the Spell am I supposed to get rid of this thing?'

Looking down, Sunny calculated that he had a dozen or so seconds left before it was time to act. The repulsive abomination was slowly crawling toward them, scaling the torso of the giant statue at a disturbingly steady pace.

'Think, think...'

Several seconds later, Sunny approached Effie and kneeled by her side. Taking the huntress by the hand, he put something into her palm and said:

"Do you feel the colossus moving up and down? That's his steps. I need you to start counting them. If I'm not back after thirty steps, throw the thing I gave you in that direction as hard as you can. Alright?"

Effie gave him a nod. Her usual humor was gone, replaced by grim determination.

"Good. Well... wish me luck."

The huntress lingered for a moment and then said:

"Good luck."

When he was ready to walk away, she suddenly gripped his arm.

Sunny stopped and raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

Effie hesitated before speaking.

"Listen, Sunny... if... if you die... I can have your soul shards, right?"

He stared at her for a second, his face twitching.

'This wench!'

"Absolutely not! If I die, all my shards are to be thrown into the sea. No one is to get anything, understand?"

With that, he left the cohort behind and walked to the edge of the swaying stone platform.

'...Here goes nothing.'

Jumping down, Sunny slid to the giant's shoulder and caught himself from falling all the way into the raging waves by grabbing onto a crack in the stone. To his right, the shoulder was slowly moving as the colossus swung his hand. To his left, a curved path of stone led all the way across the chest of the statue to its other shoulder.

This curving path was, in fact, the collar of the giant's tunic, carved masterfully from stone by the unknown sculptor. Stepping on it, Sunny struggled to keep his balance on the swaying slippery surface and hurried forward.

Soon, he was directly above the climbing eel. The abomination was already close, allowing Sunny to discern every repugnant detail of its translucent, giant body.

'What the hell. Why does everything have to be so disgusting?'

A moment later, he sighed.

'Let's... try this.'

Summoning the Prowling Thorn, Sunny gritted his teeth and cut his forearm, smearing some blood on the blade of the kunai. Then, he used all the strength he had in his body to hurl the dagger down.

The Prowling Thorn spun in the air and hit the giant eel right in the place where its eye should have been. Sunny did not notice any visual organs on the creature's body, but on the deformed humanoid skull hiding beneath the flesh, that's where the eye socket was.

The kunai wedged itself deep into the monster's head, causing a small fountain of crimson blood to erupt upward. Of course, such a tiny wound was nothing for a creature of this size. For a moment, everything became silent.

...Then, hundreds of slender tentacles suddenly exploded from the eel's flesh and shoot in Sunny's direction in a chaotic, slithering mass of translucent flesh.

'Damn it!'

Forced to dismiss the Prowling Thorn to avoid being thrown off the ledge, Sunny lunged forward. A moment later, the tentacles reached his previous position and crashed into the stone, sending shards flying into the air.

Sunny kept running, knowing that the tentacles were just a second away from piercing him. The sounds of breaking stone were thundering just behind his back, getting closer and closer with each moment. The Prowling Thorn appeared in his hand one again.

Reaching the end of the path and with nowhere left to run, Sunny cursed... and jumped straight into the darkness.

Chapter 205: Journey To The South

Sadly, the cohort did not get a lot of time to rest. Despite the fact that it wasn't even noon yet, they had a lot of ground to cover before sunset.

The plan they had made at the start of the day was to leave the Dark City from the south by climbing the wall near the grandiose Main Gates and then travel through the Labyrinth to the next safe height, which was about ten kilometers away.

However, due to the fact that they had ended up in the catacombs instead and had to escape through the chamber belonging to the Lord of the Dead, the party was now to the east of the ruins, near the beautiful statue of the faceless woman. Not only did they have to circle around the city now, but there was also less time to reach safety before the flood of darkness devoured the Forgotten Shore once again.

Standing up in a chorus of disappointed groans, the cohort assumed the marching formation and set out south. Walking through the mud of the colossal crater was not easy, but for the time being, they had no other choice... unless they wanted to scale the monumental stone wall and return to the Dark City, of course.

Luckily, with both Sunny's shadow and Kai scouting the way ahead, they didn't have to worry about being ambushed by monsters. So, for the time being, the only thing the party had to struggle with was moving their feet through the wet dirt.

The monotonous silence was broken only by laborious breathing and slurping of mud.

...A while later, the impregnable and seemingly endless grey wall that loomed some distance away and above them slowly twisted, drifting away from the edge of the crater.

They were finally leaving the cursed ruins behind.

Turning around, Sunny looked back and studied the sight of the city that had been his whole world for these past four... almost five months.

Far away, the floor of the gargantuan crater sharply rose, forming a tall slope. On it stood the unassailable wall of polished grey stone, firm and unyielding despite the thousands of years that had passed since the demise of its creators.

P AND A N OVEL From where he stood, Sunny could see the flood of crimson coral swelling at its base, sharp blades powerlessly scraping against the cold stone in hopeless attempts to find purchase. It looked as though the city was being besieged by the land itself.

'If it knew what awaits inside, the Labyrinth would be trying to escape as far as possible from that damned place instead.'

With a sigh, Sunny looked up and noticed a lone human figure standing on the wall, watching them disappear into the distance. That figure was crooked and dark, emanating a cold feeling of foreboding.

A few moments later, it turned away and disappeared from view.

Harus had chosen to return to the Bright Castle.

Trying not to shiver, Sunny lingered for a few seconds, and then hurried to catch up with the group.

They were safe from him, at least...

'For now.'

***panda novel

Because the crater was too big, the bent of its edge was almost imperceptible. Only by looking far into the distance could one say that it was actually curved. Because of this, the cohort could have continued traveling through the crater for a long time without having to move farther away from the goal of today's journey, which lay to the southwest of their current position.

However, they had to leave the crater and return to the Labyrinth sooner or later — not only to escape the black water, but also because there was nothing to hide behind on this vast muddy plain. If any flying Nightmare Creature decided to attack them from above, the cohort would have no defense against it.

The Labyrinth, while hiding its own fair share of terrifying threats, at least offered some measure of protection.

That's why, at some point, Nephis led the party to the sharp slope of the crater, and the six of them climbed out of it. With the help of Kai and the trusty golden rope, the task wasn't hard at all.

For some time after that, they walked on the ridge separating the crater from the Labyrinth proper, but then, finally, had to turn west and enter the maze of crimson coral.

Sunny couldn't help but sigh once the familiar coral walls surrounded him once again. He didn't miss the first months of his infernal voyage into the Dream Realm at all.

Well... maybe a little. But not because of the damn Labyrinth itself, that's for sure.

The crimson forest was simultaneously the same and vastly different from the region of it that he had traveled through before.

The coral maze itself was pretty much identical to how it had been east of the gargantuan crater. However, the creatures populating it in these parts were vastly different.

There were no members of the carapace legion around, at least not anywhere Sunny could see. Instead, the dominant tribe of Nightmare Creatures in this region seemed to consist of nasty, spider-like critters that had a habit of decorating the walls and passages of the Labyrinth with endless amounts of grey, incredibly sticky cobwebs.

What's worse, their web seemed to be made not out of spider silk, but out of thin metal wires that were as tough as iron and could cut the victim into little pieces if it thrashed too much after getting caught.

Needless to say, getting yourself stuck in these webs was tantamount to a death sentence.

The deeper into the Labyrinth they went, the more of these cobwebs surrounded them. It came to the point where they had to use Cassie's flying rapier to clear the path ahead every few minutes, slowing down the speed of the cohort to a crawl.

During one of these stops, Sunny rubbed his face and thought:

'I just hope that nothing attacks us while we wait.'

Turning to him, the shadow glared for a few moments and then tiredly shook its head. It then placed one palm across its face and looked down, as if defeated.

'...What? What did I say?'

A moment later, several massive spider-like creatures jumped out of the cracks in the coral and attacked them.

Chapter 206: Triumph | Shadow Slave

The spiders were about the size of a human, incredibly fast, and had plates of something that resembled iron covering parts of their repulsive bodies. They looked like armored battle machines created for the sole purpose of slaughtering living things.

They also looked strangely familiar. With a little effort, Sunny realized that these abominations looked a lot like lesser, much smaller versions of the giant Fallen Beasts that had destroyed the original Stone Saint and her kin.

It's just that their size and armor weren't nearly as formidable.

If so...

'I have bad news for you, fools.'

As soon as the spiders attacked, the members of the cohort reacted with the deadly calmness of experienced Dark City hunters. Weapons flashed in the air, severing limbs and piercing through iron as though it was paper. Effie straight up flattened one of the creatures with a devastating strike of her battered shield. The poor beast didn't even have time to understand what a huge mistake it had made.

The others were no less efficient. Sunny himself threw the Prowling Thorn and pulled on the invisible string as soon as it sunk into the flesh of one of the spiders, bringing its jump to an abrupt end and sending it crashing to the ground. Before the beast could stand up, Quiet Dancer streaked through the air and pierced its head clean through.

Just a few short seconds after the spiders had tried to ambush the group of humans, the battle was over. Three dead Nightmare Creatures were sprawled in the mud, while the fourth one ended up pinned to a coral wall with several arrows.

They could have even shaved a second or two if it weren't for the need to look out for the spiderwebs.

Sunny shook his head.

'Disappointing.'

Wait.. why was he disappointed? Great! This was great! Not every victory had to almost cost him his life.

If there was one thing to feel disappointed about, it was that this one was so swift that he had not even gotten the chance to finish any of the enemies himself, thus not receiving any rewards from the Spell. But even then, he would be glad to only fight easy battles like this in the future.

Nephis cleaned the blade of her sword with a piece of cloth, listened to the silence for a few moments to make sure that nothing else was going to attack them, and then gave the cohort a go-ahead to start dressing the monsters down.

Soon, soul shards, strips of meat and other useful parts were cut, cleaned, and put into Effie's enchanted bag. Everything was done with efficient speed and professionalism that could only come from a lot of experience.

Sunny could only shake his head again.

They were able to dispose of the iron spiders with such ease because of two reasons. First, as far as Nightmare Creatures went, these ones were not on the same level as, for example, carapace scavengers. They had a slight advantage in speed, but were not nearly as strong, agile, and ridiculously tough.

If Sunny could guess, he would say that the iron spiders relied heavily on their webs and battlefield advantage to defeat the prey. Because the cohort had destroyed the webs in advance, their main advantage was gone.

The second reason was the cohort itself. They were some of the deadliest humans on the Forgotten Shore. Sunny was sure that at least four of them could kill a Pathfinder of the Host in single combat... if not one of the lieutenants themselves.

They were the best and the brightest the outer settlement could offer, after all. Effie had been right when she said that there had never been such a powerful cohort outside the walls of the Bright Castle before.

All in all, the six of them were more than equipped to handle just three awakened beasts. The Labyrinth was going to really try harder if it wished to see them dead.

Sunny chuckled.

"Just" three awakened beasts... yeah. How crazy did this sound?
panda novel

And yet, it was true.

Finishing up with the dead spiders, the cohort indifferently left their eviscerated bodies behind and continued on their way.

After several more minor skirmishes with the iron spiders, they had finally reached their destination. Not too far away from them, colored pink by the evening sun, a magnificent arch of white marble rose high above the sea of crimson coral.

The giant structure was clearly created by the same people who had built the Bright Castle, and made from the same stone. It looked like a much larger sibling of the pristine arch that guarded the entrance to the white road which climbed all the way to the outer settlement.

Only this one was much more weathered, bleak, and damaged. Signs of corrosion and deep cracks covered its surface, with one of its sides being partially collapsed.

Sunny studied the arch and looked at Nephis:

"This is our stop for the night?"

She gave him a simple nod and said after a short pause:

"We need to pick up our pace. The night is close, and we might have to fight to clear the top of it."

Sunny sighed. Fighting again... when would they finally be able to rest? It had been such a long day.

However, he kept his mouth shut. Changing Star was the most tired out of all of them... due to healing all their wounds, no less. And he didn't see her complaining.

So it wasn't his place.

P AND A N OVEL To his left, Effie suddenly cursed and groaned:

"More fighting? Come on! When are we finally going to eat?"

Sunny blinked.

'Well... that works, too, I guess.'

Staring at the huntress, Nephis shook her head and silently walked forward.

Soon, they reached the giant arch. Kai summoned his bow and flew up, only to return a few minutes later and report that no terrible monster was nesting on top of the ancient structure.

With sighs of relief, the members of the cohort climbed the golden rope one after another and were soon standing far above the Labyrinth, silently watching as the flood of black water drowned it in the lightless depths.

As the sun disappeared beyond the horizon, they were left on a rectangular island made out of white marble. All around it, there was nothing but the undulating waves of the dark sea.

Sunny was once again surrounded from all sides by nothing but darkness and black water. He did not like the feeling.

Chapter 207: Beach Episode | Shadow Slave

The night passed with no incidents. In the morning, Sunny was woken up by the sound of the surging waves and opened his eyes to see the sun slowly rising from beyond the horizon.

Rubbing his face, he sat up and looked around, noticing that most of the cohort was still asleep. Only Kai, who had been the last one to stand watch, was awake, sitting on the edge of the arch and admiring the dawn with a dreamy look on his face.

Sunny wanted to call out to him and warn the charming archer not to sit this close to the edge, but then remembered that Kai could fly.

'Yeah. Like I would forget it again!'

Using the opportunity, he dove into the Soul Sea and summoned Stone Saint from the depths of the Shadow Core, where she was sleeping in the embrace of nurturing black flames. Just like before, the Shadow did not appear from a sphere of light like an Echo would, but stepped out from a whirlpool of dark fire.

Then, she stood motionlessly in front of Sunny like an actual statue, seemingly indifferent both to his presence and the wounds covering her body.

P AND A N OVEL Sunny walked around the Stone Saint, studying the extent of damage done to her by the undead horde. The armor of the taciturn knight was battered and broken, pierced in several places by the claws of the countless skeletons she had fought. The ruby dust wasn't flowing from the breaches anymore, but he could see deep gashes on her smooth, grey skin.

'Bastards.'

Who dares to hurt his Shadow?

Shaking his head, Sunny dismissed the Saint, sending her back into the restorative darkness of the Shadow Core.

The damage, while extensive, was not really threatening to her existence. In a couple of days, his pet monster should fully recover.

In fact, she already looked better than she had yesterday.

Leaving the Soul Sea, Sunny inhaled the fresh air, lingered for a few moments, and then turned to Kai:

"Hey, Night. Are you stupid? Don't sit this close to the edge!"

The charming archer looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

"I can fly, remember? If I fall..."

Sunny scoffed.

"I'm not worried about you falling into the cursed sea. I am worried about something dragging you off into it. That'd be terrible, right?"

Quite happy with himself, he grinned and turned away.

'What a nice way to start the day...'

Because everyone needed some time to rest and recuperate, they decided to spend a day on the marble arch and continue their journey tomorrow.

As the result, Sunny was currently staring at the sight that wasn't really funny, but filled him with mirth nevertheless.

Back in the real world, when he had time to consume some entertainment, Sunny had noticed a certain popular trope. In most dramas, webtoons, and cartoons aimed at young boys and teenagers, the heroes would inevitably end up spending a day at the beach during their adventures.

He didn't quite know why such a trope existed, but suspected that it was just an excuse to show the female characters in nothing but revealing swimsuits.

Not that he had anything against it...

In any case, Sunny had never imagined that he was going to end up in such an episode himself one day. panda novel

'This is... simply hilarious!'

Barely holding himself from laughing out loud, Sunny glanced at his companions.

Because everyone's armor and weapons were damaged during the battle in the catacombs, they had to keep these Memories inside the Soul Sea for a bit of time to allow them to restore themselves — just like Stone Saint was currently doing in the depths of his Shadow Core.

As the result, all of them — including Sunny himself — were currently wearing nothing except for some loincloths and, in the case of the girls, makeshift brassieres.

Provided, these crude undergarments weren't really swimsuits, and the marble arch could barely be considered a beach even at night... but still, the situation was funnily similar.

They were all half-naked and relaxing in the middle of a something that someone could call an adventure, so it was close enough.

'Ha!'

He was in a rather good mood.

Everyone was busy doing their thing. There was a fire in the middle of the arch, with roasting meat filling the air with an appetizing aroma. Effie was tending to it.

The tan and lean body of the muscular huntress looked like it was cut from stone, as if she was a sculpture of an ancient goddess come to life. Sunny

tried to count her abs and got distracted halfway through by... uh... not so stonelike parts of her robust figure.

After a couple of seconds of thoughtless bliss, Sunny had to hurriedly look away. The last thing he wanted was...

'Pure thoughts!'

Nephis was helping Effie with the breakfast. Next to the vigorous huntress, her figure seemed especially slender and lithe. However, she was also extremely athletic in appearance. Her ivory skin was pleasantly contrasted against the olive skin of their boisterous pathfinder.

'What a sight to behold...'

Uh... from a purely aesthetic standpoint, of course.

Seeing Changing Star like that reminded Sunny of the early days of their stay in the Dream Realm. Things had been much simpler back then.

Suddenly wistful, he looked away and checked what Cassie was doing. The blind girl was resting near the fire, wrapped in her beautiful cloak. With her delicate features and small stature, she looked extremely lovely.

And then... there were Kai and Caster.

Sunny sighed and looked down at his own scrawny body. Honestly, after all these months spent hunting monsters, eating meat and absorbing shadow fragments, he looked much better than he used to. In fact, by human standards, he was nothing short of... well, above average.

Even as far as Awakened went, he could probably compete with some in the looks department.

...But those two specimens were simply on another level!

Kai was tall and shaped like a young god, with lean muscles rolling under his flawless skin and a svelte figure that begged to be sculpted into a marble masterpiece. Sunny could swear that even sunlight was attracted to him,

illuminating the charming archer in just a way to make him look as gorgeous as possible.

Currently, Kai was tending to his arrows, somehow managing to make even that simple task look glamorous.

Caster was much the same, with a perfect body and broad shoulders that simply screamed of power, appeal and potency. With a darker skin to match his gallant and manly image, he was basically the epitome of masculinity. This was contrasted by a handsome, but gentle face and humorous green eyes, creating a rather tempting visage.

Sunny grimaced and turned away.

'You know what? To hell with this beach day nonsense! Let's do something productive...'

Chapter 208: Something Productive | Shadow Slave

Walking over to Kai, Sunny cleared his throat and forced himself to not cover his eyes. The damn archer was just too dazzling. Him being shirtless in crowded places should have honestly been categorized as a public hazard back in the real world.

If not, there was a gross oversight.

'I wonder how he was made. Probably in a secret government laboratory or a magic cauldron of some sort. I mean, there's no way that this dude is the same species as me... right?'

After a few seconds of Sunny blankly staring at him, Kai smiled politely:

"Uh, Sunny? Did you want something?"

Sunny flinched and covered his eyes.

"Ah! Don't smile at me!"

Kai blinked.

"...Alright."

Breathing heavily, Sunny glared at him and slowly lowered his hand.

"That's better. And yes, I did want something."

Kai suddenly livened up and pointed at his chest.

"What is that? An accessory?"

'What is he...'

Lowering his gaze, Sunny noticed the mysterious key hanging on a thread tied around his neck.

He didn't really want to show it to anyone, but with the Puppeteer's Shroud restoring itself in the Soul Sea, there were not a lot of places where he could hide it.

None that he was willing to use, at least...

Plus, no one else was supposed to be able to see the light of divinity, so to them, it just looked like a small iron key.

Sunny frowned.

"It's not an accessory. It's a key. "

Kai hesitated.

"Oh. What does it open?"

Sunny shrugged.

"How should I know?"

The charming archer seemed a little confused.

"But if it's not an accessory and it doesn't open anything, why are you carrying it around?"

His questions were starting to get tiresome. Sunny sighed.

"To open something, of course!"

Kai scratched his nose.

"But you just said that you don't know what it opens."

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"It's a damn key, right?! So it has to open something! I just carry it around in case I find something that can be opened by that damned key! What's so hard to understand?!"

The beautiful archer gave him a strange look.

"Oh... I see. That definitely makes sense."

'Curses! That's not how I planned to approach him...'

Sunny instantly changed his expression and looked at Kai with a wide smile.

...The sudden shift looked sort of creepy.

"Uh, what I wanted to say, Night, my dear friend... we are friends, right? Anyway, what I wanted to say was that I hope that this answer satisfies your curiosity. That's something a friend would say... right?"

The charming young man gave him a dubious look.

"I guess?"

Sunny made his smile wider, feeling his face hurt a little. panda novel

"Great! So we are friends. Well, some might say that it's your lucky day, buddy. Because today — and only today, probably! — Sunny's Gorgeous Emporium offers customers an exclusive friendship deal. Just for friends of the establishment. Aren't you lucky?"

Kai suddenly coughed.

"...Wasn't it Sunny's Brilliant Emporium last time?"

Sunny blinked.

"Was it? Well, doesn't matter. The deal still stands. Are you interested or not?"

The archer lingered for a few moments, and then cautiously said:

"But Sunny... you still haven't told me what exactly that deal entails. Is it a deal for customers you consider friends or are you trying to sell me your "friendship"? Or wait, do you want to buy mine? Or both? Ah, I'm confused."

As if waiting for that response, Sunny nodded energetically.

"Yes! I'm glad that you asked. In fact, I have an incredible item that I want to sell. It's so incredible that I am even reluctant to part with it. But since you are my friend, I am willing to give it away. Practically for free. Full friendship discount, just for you. No need to thank me, really."

Attracted by the noise, the others left what they were doing and were now staring at the two of them. Effie got distracted from preparing meat and was now observing the circus with an expectant grin.

Realizing that he is now the center of attention, Kai sighed.

"Alright, I'll bite. What is that incredible item you want to sell me?"

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, and then suddenly stopped smiling.

"Oh, just something I had gathering dust in my Soul Sea. It's a Memory that can serve as an endless supply of arrows. As long as you don't miss."

The beautiful archer's eyes suddenly lit up. He glanced at his quiver and said:

"Wait... really? You really have such a Memory?"

P AND A N OVEL After thinking about it for a long time, Sunny had decided to give the Blood Arrow to Kai. Having the archer of their cohort armed with it would make a lot of things easier during this journey.

He could potentially earn himself a bow in the future and learn how to use it, but it wouldn't be anytime soon. Plus, with how dangerous the

enchantments of the Blood Arrow were, nothing short of excellence would fly. And excellence took a lot of time to achieve, time that he didn't have. So, giving it to a skilled archer like Kai was a better decision.

Their recent encounters with the iron spiders only made Sunny more certain that this was the right thing to do.

But he wasn't going to give it away for free.

"Yes, I do have such a Memory."

Then, he casually added:

"Oh, did I forget to say? It's can provide an endless supply of arrows, and also all those arrows will be of the Ascended rank."

A grave silence settled over the marble arch.

"You... you're in possession of an Ascended Memory?"

That question was asked by Caster. Kai didn't have to ask, because he already knew that Sunny was telling the truth.

His eyes slightly widened.

On the Forgotten Shore, Ascended Memories were exceedingly rare — for an obvious reason. Sleepers could only get one by defeating a Fallen Nightmare Creature, and there weren't a lot of people capable of such a feat. Added to that was the fact that not every kill provided a Memory. In fact, most didn't.

To receive one was the dream of every inhabitant of the Dark City.

Sunny shrugged.

"Oh, I have a couple. Why?"

...The other being the onyx armor. Which was broken and useless. But they didn't need to know that, honestly.

He grinned.

"Only the best wares in the Sunny's Astonishing Emporium! Wait, uh... was it astonishing? Ah, who cares. You get the sentiment."

Caster shook his head.

"How did you get an Ascended Memory? You?"

The grin froze on Sunny's face. When he spoke a few moments later, all humor was gone from his voice, replaced by coldness.

"Well, if you have to know. I got it by killing a Fallen Beast. Before you ask... this time, I didn't have to shake my finger or spit. I just looked at it, and it died."

Then, he turned his head and looked straight at Caster:

"I am very proficient in killing things, you know."

Chapter 209: Fireside Banter | Shadow Slave

In the end, Kai agreed to his deal. In exchange for the Blood Arrow, he gave Sunny three Memories: the two weaker arrows he had and a small charm capable of producing fire.

Sunny fed all three to the Stone Saint, bringing her amount of shadow fragments to thirty-one. That was four more than she had in the past, which meant that he received the same amount of fragments that he would have gotten by feeding her the Blood Arrow itself.

He didn't really gain anything, but also didn't lose anything. Kai was the one who really profited from their exchange.

So Sunny didn't lie when he said that it was an incredible deal.

After breakfast, which transpired in somewhat awkward silence, Sunny sprawled on the ground and smiled happily.

"You know, guys. These past few weeks made me realize something. Actually, it was all thanks to Kai, who introduced me... introduced me... uh... to Stev."

Effie stretched, making Sunny stutter and lose the train of thought for a second, then smiled with satisfaction and glanced at him.

"Really? And what is that?"

Sunny hesitated for a few moments and said:

"When I was a little kid, I loved reading webtoons about the Awakened. You know, the ones where they always explore ancient ruins, battle Nightmare Creatures, and grow more powerful with each victory."

He chuckled.

"The hero and his cohort decide on an adventure, vanquish evil, gain mighty Memories, then return to the real world and sell their spoils at the adventurer shop. They spend their money to upgrade their equipment, and immediately set out on a more epic and dangerous adventure."

P AND A NOVEL Cassie smiled.

"I loved to read those too."

Sunny glanced at her and sighed.

"Yeah. But when I got older, I couldn't help but think — what are they thinking about? Exploring ancient ruins is not a wise thing to do. In fact, only crazy people would do it. No matter how good you are, sooner or later, you will meet something more terrifying than any human can handle and die. If this was real life, why would all those adventurers go into the ruins over and over again?"

The blind girl tilted her head and opened her mouth, but then closed it again.

Sunny smiled.

"But then it hit me! They were not doing it to vanquish evil. They were doing it to collect a wide variety of powerful Memories. You see, the real dream is not to be the hero, one of their companions, or even the love interest. The real dream is to be the owner of the shop where the hero sells his trophies and buys new equipment! That way you can live a pretty life without risking your neck. That's the real goal."

He crossed his arms and added:

"After a few short years of adventuring around the Dream Realm and collecting Memories, you can retire, open a shop, and leave comfortably for the rest of your life. All you need is to sell a Memory once every couple of years. Maybe make some money off the younger, less fortunate adventurers, too."

Kai laughed and looked at Sunny with curiosity.

"So... say that we somehow manage to return to the real world and become true Awakened. Is this what you're going to do?"

Sunny thought about it for a few moments and shrugged.

"I don't know. I don't really have a lot to do in the real world, apart from compiling all the things I've learned about the Forgotten Shore into a report and giving it to a teacher who was kind to me back at the Academy. So... maybe? I don't have enough Memories yet to open a real store, though."

He glanced at the charming archer and smiled.

"What about you? What is the thing you really want to do if you return to the real world?"

Kai suddenly turned away with a look of embarrassment on his face.

"Oh... I don't know. I haven't really thought about it."

But after several seconds, he suddenly said in a shy voice:

"...Avatar Singer."

Sunny blinked.panda novel

"A what?"

The archer hesitated for a while, and then explained:

"Avatar Singer is a music competition show. Popular singers compete with each other, but the twist is that they are all using the stock VR avatars to perform. So the judges can only evaluate their voices and skill. They only learn the singer's identity after."

Effie giggled.

"Why would you want to hide your pretty face, Night? It's your best feature!"

Kai was silent for a few moments, and then smiled gently.

"I just... I just think that it would be nice, to be judged based on my skill and talent alone, with nothing else getting in the way. Also, that would be such a great way to announce my return to the fans! Just imagine... they would be so excited! That would be a perfect media storm."

Sunny shook his head. It seemed that Kai was really a celebrity. Talking about things like fan reactions and media storms with a straight face... did he even hear himself?

But it was a nice dream, at least. Better than his own stupid desires, by far.

Turning to Effie, he asked:

"What about you? What would you do in the real world?"

The huntress grinned.

"I don't even have to think about it. I would go eat chicken wings... the real ones. And then start preparing myself for the Second Nightmare. Pretty simple."

Everybody grew silent. After a while, Cassie said:

"Are you sure that you want to challenge another Nightmare?"

Effie shrugged.

"I have my reasons. So yes. For me, that is the only choice."

The blind girl was quiet for a bit, and then said:

"I would go and spend time with my mom and dad. That's the thing I want to do most in the real world."

Caster glanced at her and courtly nodded.

"I agree with Cassie. Family is the most important. When I come back, I will greet my father and look him in the eyes with pride, knowing that I did not let our clan down. Then, I will try to do everything in my power to grow as fast as possible, to relieve him of his worries and propel our bloodline to new heights."

'How very... Legacy-like of him.'

Finally turning to Nephis, Sunny looked at her with a subtly dark expression and asked:

"How about you, Neph? What are you going to do when you return to the real world?"

Changing Star was silent for a while, looking into the distance with a calm expression.

Then, she sighed and answered in a quiet voice:

"I would go visit my mom, too."

Everyone grew silent. Sunny blinked, a little confused.

"Wait. Your mom? I thought she was dead."

Nephis lingered for a bit, and then turned her face away.

"She is. Technically."

Chapter 210: Shadow Of The Past

'Technically dead? What does she mean?'

Sunny glanced at the others and saw that they, too, were confused. Everyone except for Caster, that is, who seemed like he knew something.

A few moments passed in tense silence, which was broken by Changing Star's sigh. Looking at them, she said evenly:

"My mother is one of the Hollow. She became Hollow while pregnant with me, actually. So I never really met her. Just her... body."

Nephis grew silent. After a while, a strange smile appeared on her face.

"It's funny, really. When my grandmother was still alive, I made a point of treating that body as nothing but a corpse. But once she passed away and we were the only ones left... well. I found myself getting a bit confused."

P AND A N OVEL Nephis shrugged and turned away once again.

"Anyway, before leaving for the First Nightmare, I used what little money there was left of our estate to buy her a VIP spot in a specialized Hollow care facility. They are treating her really well. But still... I don't like the idea of her being alone there. So when I return, that's what I'm going to do. Visit her."

No one said anything, heavily affected by her words.

Sunny stared at Changing Star, trying to imagine what it must have felt like, growing up in the company of your parent's soulless shell. With death staring at you through those empty eyes every day, always looming over you like a dark shadow... both of your past and your future.

Maybe that was a part of the reason why Neph hated the Spell so much.

Sensing the heaviness in the air, Changing Star glanced at them and smiled darkly.

"What? Is this your first time meeting a hollowborn? Well, I can't blame you. Creatures of my breed are pretty rare. In fact, even I have never met another one."

Then, she sighed and stretched her legs, moving them closer to the fire.

"So yeah, that and dye my hair. These are the things I would do in the real world first."

Sunny blinked.

"...Dye your hair?"

Nephis nodded.

'How is that a priority?'

Feeling that he was missing something, Sunny scratched his head and asked:

"Why?"

She glanced at him in surprise.

"What do you mean, why? I'm not used to it, and it's weird. Do I need another reason?"

He stared at her with a perplexed expression. Noticing it, Changing Star frowned and asked with a tiny hint of amusement in her voice.

"Sunny... did you, perhaps, think that this is my natural hair color?"

He was silent for a while, then opened his mouth and closed it again.

"...It's not?"

Nephis looked at him for a while with a strange expression, and then suddenly exploded with laughter.

Her laugh was melodic, pure, and very pleasant to the ear. With regret, Sunny realized that he had never heard it before.

He wished that their lives were different, so that people could hear Nephis laugh more often. But they weren't, and would probably never be.

After a while, she glanced at him and smiled.

"Sunny, it's silver, for Spell's sake. Who has natural silver hair?"

Luckily, at that point, Kai suddenly came to his rescue:

"Actually, I thought that it's natural too. Ah... it suits you very well, Lady Nephis."

Changing Star turned to him with an expression of utter surprise. Then, she glanced at Effie with a silent question.

The huntress nodded.panda novel

"Yeah, me too. I mean... who knows what you Legacies are even made of?"

Nephis blinked a couple of times, then shook her head in bewilderment.

"Well... no, it's not natural. It became like that after my First Nightmare."

Kai leaned forward with curiosity:

"Really? What color was your hair before?"

She shrugged.

"Black. A normal human color."

The charming archer stared at her, and then smiled:

"That would suit you very well too, Lady Nephis. Ah, I can just see it."

However, Sunny couldn't. The idea of Changing Star without her arresting, eye-catching silver hair simply could not fit into his head. Let alone the fact that she was a brunette! How was this even possible?

'That would look so wrong! Right?'

Well... as it turned out, life was full of surprises.

Today, he learned not one, but two entirely new things about the person he had thought he knew the best in the world.

Who would have guessed that this would happen?

'...There might be something else except for skimpy swimsuits to these beach episodes, huh?'

After that, they spent some time resting and lazily conversing with each other. However, pretty soon, people started to get restless from boredom.

To combat it somehow, Sunny suggested the idea of playing a sports game.

...His motives were not at all dictated by a secret desire to see a bunch of absolutely gorgeous young people jump around and wrestle with each while very lightly dressed. Nope, not one bit.

However, things didn't go as he had envisioned them. Pretty soon, Sunny found himself cursing as he was desperately pulling on the golden rope in a furious match of tug of war.

...Well, it was supposed to be furious. But what was actually transpiring was Effie casually holding the rope with one hand while the four of them — Sunny, Cassie, Kai and Caster — were trying to move her from the spot with no visible results whatsoever. After a while, the huntress simply pulled on the rope and sent their entire team to the ground.

'That's... that's cheating!'

With a satisfied grin, Effie walked over and towered above him, her arms akimbo. Looking down directly at Sunny, she smirked.

"Weak. When did you lose your spirit, shorty?"

Then, she winked and said in a mischievous tone:

"Back at the cathedral, you were able to perform better. Not to mention last longer..."

Sunny grew bright red and gritted his teeth:

"Shut up! People will misunderstand!"

The huntress looked at him with a shocked expression.

"Mis—misunderstand? What are you... oh!"

Then, she pretended to be horrified and covered her mouth with one hand.

"You... what kind of a degenerate are you?! Training! I meant while you were training!"

While Sunny was staring at her in utter disbelief, his mouth wide open, Effie snorted, then turned away and exploded with laughter. Shaking her head, the boisterous huntress giggled one last time and walked away.

'...No more sports games! Ever! That wretched troublemaker will win them all, anyway!'

He needed to teach himself how to come up with better ideas...

Chapter 211: Game Of Lies

With a bit of disappointment, Sunny realized that all types of physical activities were out of the question. Not only because Effie was going to win every damn game, but also because Cassie couldn't participate in most.

If that was the case, they would have to settle for a battle of wit, instead.

After thinking for a while, he made a few preparations and addressed his companions in a mischievous tone:

"Alright, let's have another competition. This time, it will be a challenge for your minds."

Sunny paused for a few moments and then smiled.

"And to spice things up, this time, there will be a prize. The winner will get this!"

With that, he produced the ascended soul shard that he had gotten from the Corpse Eater from behind his back and showed it to everyone. The beautiful crystal shined with an alluring, ethereal light.

Except for Nephis, who was resting with her eyes closed, everyone stared at the shard with a lot of interest. Sunny grinned.

Of course, they were interested! It was very rare to see one of these, after all.

He didn't really have a use for this thing right now, though. And making the cohort stronger would, in turn, increase his own chances of getting through the expedition alive. So parting with the shard was not that detrimental.

Especially if he could have some fun in return.

Effie was the first one to speak:

"What are the terms of the competition?"

Sunny put the crystal away before answering:

"It's really simple. I'll give you a riddle, and the first person to answer correctly wins. How does that sound?"

The huntress looked at him with doubt and shrugged.

"Sounds boring. But alright, let's play."

Smiling, Sunny commanded the shadow to separate from him and put the Ordinary Rock on it. Then, he turned to Effie and said:

"Listen carefully. Imagine if you will that the two of us, my shadow and I, are in possession of a rare treasure. One of us is an honorable, extremely attractive Awakened that can tell no lie, while the other one is a vile, ugly, stupid devil that would never tell a word of truth. But you don't know which one is which."

Effie grinned.

"I mean... isn't it obvious?"

Sunny blinked.

"Shut up! Also, it's an imaginary situation. Okay? Anyway, you have to find out which one of us is hiding the treasure. If you do, you'll get the treasure. If you don't, the devil will kill you. You can only ask one question, either to me or the shadow. Understand?"

The huntress giggled and flexed her muscles.

"Can I just beat the answer out of you?"

Sunny observed her vigorous figure for a moment too long, and then smiled.

"You can. Also, you're dead."

Effie stared at him in bewilderment.

"What? Why?!"

He shrugged and glanced in her direction with disdain.

"Did I not tell you that you can only ask one question? Well who told you to ask whether you can beat me up or not? What a stupid way to waste a question!"

P AND A N OVEL While the unruly was huntress was throwing daggers at him with her eyes, Sunny turned away and said:

"Next!"

Kai smiled apologetically at Effie and approached him.

"Alright, Night. What's your question? Do consider that our roles might have changed since the last round."

The charming young man gestured at the marble beneath his feet and addressed the shadow:

"What color is the stone I am pointing to?"

Since Sunny had expected such a turn of events, the Ordinary Rock immediately answered in the deepest voice he could muster.panda novel

"...White."

Kai looked at Sunny with a triumphant smile and said:

"So... I win? The shadow is obviously the honorable Awakened."

Sunny gave him a nod.

"You indeed learned which one of us is a dirty liar. Surprise... it was me. However, that was not the task. The task was to find out which one of us is

hiding the treasure, and you have already used up your only question. So... sorry, buddy, but you're also dead. I'll miss you very much! In this hypothetical situation..."

The charming archer sighed and looked at him with reproach. Sunny raised his eyebrows.

"What? Why are you looking at me like this? Be grateful that I allowed you to play at all! With your Flaw, you are like a walking cheat as far as this game is concerned."

He scowled, then added:

"In fact, the mere fact that you claim to have a Flaw is an affront to us, truly Flawed people!"

Kai lingered for a bit and walked to the side to sit near Effie. Sunny had to suppress his laugh when he noticed that the boisterous huntress reacted to being this close to the charming young man's deific body pretty much exactly the same as he himself sometimes reacted to her.

'Get your head out of the gutter! Pure thoughts, Effie!'

A wide grin still found its way onto his face. Shaking his head, Sunny turned away to call the next contestant, but Kai suddenly spoke, interrupting him:

"You're not entirely right, you know," he said gently.

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"About what?"

The archer looked down before answering.

"About my Flaw. Yes, it is not as heavy of a burden as many others have to carry. But it's still a curse."

'What is he talking about? It's almost entirely like a second Aspect Ability!'

Looking at Kai with a doubtful expression, Sunny asked:

"Yeah? How, exactly? Please explain, because I really can't think of a situation where this Flaw of yours could be a burden."

The beautiful young man was silent for a while, and then looked up at Sunny with a sad smile.

"Imagine hearing the person who is the most important to you in the whole wide world telling you that they love you, only to realize that they don't. Imagine listening to your friend's words of encouragement, only to understand that he secretly wishes for you to crash and burn..."

He sighed.

"Ignorance is bliss, Sunny. After returning from my First Nightmare, I had to come to terms with the fact that most of the people in my life were not who I thought they were. And that what hid behind their smiles was ugly and vicious."

Kai gestured to himself and said:

"Because of who I am... and how I am... there was always a whirlpool of people around me. But after learning their true faces, I couldn't... well. Let's just say that, if I had the choice, I would have preferred to stay blissfully blind to the truth forever."

He grew quiet.

'Damn.'

Suddenly, Kai smiled.

"But that's why I enjoy spending time with you so much, Sunny! No matter how bizarre the things you say are, they're always true. I never met anyone as stupidly honest as you. It's very refreshing!"

Sunny shifted uncomfortably.

'Uh... did he just call me stupid?'

Now he was kind of sorry for mocking the charming young man about his Flaw. Perhaps it would be useful to someone like Sunny. But to a person like Kai, who always attracted the worst kind of attention from people, it could really be incredibly painful.

The Spell knew what it was doing.

It always hit you in your most vulnerable spot.

'Damned Spell. The being that weaved it must have been the worst kind of a sick bastard...'

Chapter 212: Knights And Knaves

"Uh... sure."

One day Kai would inevitably learn that Sunny was not as honest of a person as he considered him to be, but until then, having the naive archer believe in this ridiculous notion was rather... beneficial.

Turning away with a bit of awkwardness, Sunny glanced at Caster and called:

"Next!"

The proud Legacy was looking at Nightingale with a heavy expression. Hearing Sunny's voice, he lingered for a moment and then shook his head.

It seemed that Caster did not want to play his game.

Sunny was also suddenly painfully aware that between the six of them, four people had openly shared their Flaws with the rest, be it out of necessity or because of trust. Only two had not.

One of the two was Sunny, and the other one was Caster.

Sunny knew why he was hiding his Flaw from everyone, but what was the proud scion's reason? It sort of went against his whole honorable and dependable persona. With how devoted he acted toward Nephis and the cohort, it was strange to see him keeping secrets.

Was his reason the same as Sunny's, a dire vulnerability that the Flaw would uncover? Or was there some other reason? Maybe he didn't trust the members of the cohort as much as he tried to make them think he did.

And if so... why?

With a shrug, Sunny left Caster alone. There was no point in lingering on these thoughts now. Until he had more information, any conclusion he

could make would be useless, anyway.

Looking at Cassie, he smiled and said:

"Hey, Cas. Wanna give it a try?"

The blind girl hesitated for a bit, and then slowly approached him.

While she was walking over, Sunny couldn't help but think back to a conversation he had with her in the distant past. Back then, Cassie had told him that knowledge could be the heaviest thing in the world. The burden of her Flaw, while completely different from Kai's, was at the same time eerily similar.

They both longed for the bliss of ignorance, but were doomed to always bear the crushing weight of unwanted knowledge.

When Sunny thought about it, he found that all members of the cohort were connected with each other by invisible strings. Many things about them were like reflections, simultaneously the same, but also completely opposite.

Like the fact that he could tell no lie, while Kai could not be lied to. Or the fact that Nephis was like sunlight, while he was made of shadows. Cassie could not see, while he had basically two pairs of eyes. Changing Star dreamed of destroying the Nightmare Spell, but Effie dreamed of making it her paradise.

And so on.

Were these the strings of fate? Or was he just making empty connections because that was what humans were prone to do?

Come to think of it, only Caster didn't seem to be connected to any of them in any kind of a meaningful way. What was that all about?

Cassie sat down near Sunny, pulling him out of his thoughts.

He forced out a smile.

"Ah, right. Just like I said, the roles might have switched. So, what is your question?"

Cassie smiled and gestured to the shadow.

"My question is: if I were to ask Sunny which one of you has the treasure, what would he say?"

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then gave the Ordinary Stone a mental command to speak one of the answers that he had whispered to it in advance.

In the same comically deep voice, the shadow seemed to speak:

"...The shadow has it."

Cassie nodded and turned to Sunny with subtle glee on her exquisite, doll-like face.

"Sunny, you have the treasure. Give."

With that, she expectantly outstretched her hand.

With a disappointed sigh, Sunny put the ascended soul shard in her palm and said in a listless voice:panda novel

"Congratulations. You've won. Great job, yay."

Cassie grasped the shard and giggled.

Meanwhile, Effie leaned forward with a bewildered look:

"What?! That's it?!"

She stared at the blind girl in astonishment, and then asked:

P AND A N OVEL "How the hell did you do it?"

Cassie smiled and crushed the shard in her small fist, absorbing the soul essence. Then, she shook her head and said:

"It's simple, really. No matter who you ask about the other person's answer, their answer will always be the opposite of the correct one. That's because the Awakened would have to tell the truth about the lie, while the devil would have to tell a lie about the truth. Do you understand?"

Effie thought for a moment, then shook her head.

"Nope. All the words you said seem to be familiar, but I don't understand crap. What do you even mean?"

Cassie laughed.

"Well, you should think about it in your free time. Or, you know... just beat Sunny up the next time he decides to tease you with such riddles."

With that, she went away, quite happy with herself.

Sunny watched her go with his mouth wide open.

'Did she really just say that?!'

Meanwhile, the perplexed huntress was staring at Sunny with a deep frown.

"Yeah... I might just do that the next time..."

He paled.

"What's up with that? This was an honest competition! Don't be a sore loser!"

Effie grinned menacingly.

"Sore? Let's see which one of use will be sore when I'm done with you."

'What... what kind of soreness does she mean, I wonder? Wait, no! Why would I wonder about that?!'

Standing up, Sunny glanced at Effie and scoffed.

"Who's going to be done with who? Don't flatter yourself, beanpole."

With that, he walked away with contempt clearly written all over his face.

His pace, however, was suspiciously hurried.

A while later, the day was drawing to a close. Some of the Memories had already restored themselves, so almost everyone was wearing their clothes and armors.

Which, as far as Sunny was concerned, was a real shame.

...From a purely aesthetic point of view, of course!

However, something else attracted his full attention.

At the far end of the marble arch, Nephis and Caster were standing facing each other, with sharp swords in their hands.

They were about to clash...

Chapter 213: Sword Saints | Shadow Slave

Back when Nephis was teaching Sunny how to use the sword, he had never been good enough to be her sparring partner. Once he learned enough to be of any use in a training fight, their fragile alliance had already broken and shattered to pieces.

So, apart from that short altercation on the somber slopes of the Ashen Barrow, they had never actually crossed swords with each other.

Now, it seemed, Changing Star had found a reliable sparring partner. Caster had not only replaced Sunny as her right-hand man, but also filled the roles that Sunny had been either reluctant or unfit to take on.

'Well... good for them.'

Once the Memories of the cohort were close to being fully restored, Nephis and Caster moved to the far end of the white arch to practice. Now, they were standing opposite each other, ready to begin.

Although no one called him over, Sunny approached the two Legacies and sat down, ready to enjoy the spectacle. He was keenly interested in observing these two immensely skilled swordsmen in action.

Both of them had been trained for combat from the day they could walk. Watching them would surely be helpful to his understanding of battle styles and techniques. Not to mention that he was very interested to see the rematch between Nephis and Caster. The last time he saw them fight, Changing Star had lost, but not by much.

She also had held back her Aspect Ability at that time, but he doubted that that would change today. Neph's flame could be used both to heal and annihilate, but sadly, not to train.

Caster glanced at him and frowned with visible displeasure.

Was he irritated because Sunny was about to learn a thing or two about his technique, or because Sunny was ruining his alone time with Nephis?

'Either way, I don't care.'

"What are you doing?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Watching. Why? Does this part of the arch belongs to your clan or something?"

The proud Legacy shook his head and turned away.

"Do as you wish."

Neph glanced at Sunny and didn't say anything. However, he could tell that she didn't mind.

In fact, it was almost as if she was approving of his decision.

Without wasting any more time, the two of them clashed in a whirlwind of steel, moving with the kind of speed that made it difficult for Sunny to follow along. The clangor of swords filled the air.

A bit stunned, he stared at the furious fight with a blank expression.

'...Damn.'

After the months of hunting monsters in the Dark City and his lessons with the Stone Saint, Sunny thought that he had developed his skill a lot. And he did. It's just that compared to Nephis and Caster, he was still so far behind that it was nothing short of disheartening.

Before, he had sometimes entertained the thought of maybe being able to stand against them... well, at least one of them... on equal ground. But now, this illusion was ruthlessly broken.

If things went south and he ended up on the opposite sides of the barricades with Caster, facing him would be tantamount to committing suicide. For now, at least.

Which, of course, simply meant that instead of facing him, Sunny would have to stab him in the back.

'Duly noted.'

He wasn't going to take on an enemy of this caliber in a forthright manner, anyway. What was he, a fool?

Concentrating on the fight, Sunny watched attentively. With the benefit of his new experience, he was able to discern more and learn more from how these two experts moved and acted. Sometimes, he was even able to predict what they were going to do next.

However, as time passed, a subtle frown appeared on his face.

'What is she doing? That doesn't make sense.'

Sunny had been able to notice two unexpected things from how Nephis fought against Caster.

The first one was rather easy to spot. While Caster did not use the full extent of his incredible speed, he did use a fair share of it, making it almost impossible for Nephis to win any of their matches. She lost much more than she won, almost always by a few fractions of a second. Which was seemingly not conducive to training at all.

What was the point of training if one of the participants had almost no chance of winning because of how large the gap between them and their opponent was? There was a reason why Neph had never used Sunny as a sparring partner in the past, after all.

But then, with a bit of amusement, he realized that Changing Star was doing exactly what he had done with the Stone Saint. She was tempering herself

against an overwhelming force. That's why she had instructed Caster to use just enough of his Aspect Ability to always be much faster than her.

Losing in a fight against a superior opponent was truly the best way to learn.

'Ha! So I was right in my approach, after all.'

If Changing Star was doing the same, he had to be right.

The second thing he had noticed, however, was much more perplexing.

It was that Nephis was not using her usual flowing and unpredictable battle style. Instead, she was moving with precise and firm elegance, hiding behind a carefully woven wall of defense and patiently waiting for an opening to appear — instead of creating one herself.

While intricate and impressive, this style was still a bit lacking in comparison to her real one. What's more, while it was deliberate and dependable, it was also rigid.

If there was one thing that Nephis would never tolerate in her battle art, it was rigidity. Her whole worldview was built around the idea that nothing had more value than adaptability. That's why the style she had taught Sunny suited her so well.

It was designed to be the epitome of changeability.

So, the question was...

Why the hell she was using something so alien to her against Caster?

The answer was pretty obvious. Either Nephis was trying to experiment with something new in an effort to adopt elements of this style into her own... which didn't seem very likely...

Or she didn't want Caster to know her true combat style too well, for some reason.

But what could that reason be?

Sunny rubbed his chin.

'Interesting...'

Chapter 214: Transient Shadow | Shadow Slave

214 Transient Shadow

Did Nephis distrust Caster for some reason?

Sunny surely did, and to be entirely honest, he didn't even need any reason to do so. His intuition and general paranoia were enough.

But Changing Star was different. He had learned a bitter lesson and now knew that everything she ever did had a firm logic behind it. Even if that logic was entirely different from that of a normal person.

So if Nephis was hiding her true battle style from Caster, there was a reason for it.

But it didn't make any sense. From everything else that she had done, he was her most trusted lieutenant. Changing Star entrusted more to Caster than she ever had to anyone else. Caster himself also had never acted against Nephis's interests.

In fact, he was even a bit too loyal. The bastard was always near Nephis, as though glued to her side. He also didn't seem to like it when others got too close to her.

In that regard, he was almost like that flying rapier of Cassie's. During their entire day on the marble arch, the unfriendly Echo somehow always managed to remain between the blind girl and any men who tried to approach her for whatever reason. The message it was sending was quite clear.

I'm watching you!

It was honestly rather comical.

Sunny shook his head. The dynamic of Changing Star's relationship with Caster was really weird. But once again, he didn't have enough information

to make any conclusions. All he could do was keep his eyes open and try to sleep with one of them open when the handsome Legacy was on watch duty.

Maybe it was some strange Legacy thing? Like guarding the secrets of the clan against the prying eyes of other clans.

Who knew?

Glancing at the fighting swordsmen, Sunny suddenly got an idea.

After considering it for a bit, he looked at them again. This time, his eyes were burning.

'That... that actually might work!'

The problem with his technique at the moment was that it lacked true individuality. Sunny knew that there was a secret hiding inside his shadow that could become the foundation of his own unique battle style.

He just couldn't understand what that secret was.

His progress at deciphering it had stalled. While training, Sunny had trouble keeping his eyes both on the Stone Saint and on the shadow. Whenever he tried, the taciturn knight would inevitably send him into a sea of pain. But even if he managed it somehow, there was an invisible wall standing between him and anything even remotely resembling understanding.

He was in a dire need of a breakthrough.

So what if... his shadows tried to imitate someone else instead of him? And not just someone, but a real sword expert in the middle of a fight?

Not only would Sunny be able to observe every tiny detail of its movements, but there would also be something to compare them against.

The shadow was a part of him, after all. It was hard to tell where Sunny ended and the shadow began. That's why the difference in how it moved and how he moved was almost imperceptible.

But if it followed someone else, he would be able to separate the cadence and pattern of that person's movements from the shadow's by contrasting it against his own.

This had to work!

Burning with anticipation, Sunny waited for Nephis and Caster to take a short break, and then send the shadow over to the handsome Legacy.

Leisurely strolling over the white marble, the shadow approached Caster and brazenly glued itself to his feet. Then, it crossed its arms and glared at the Legacy with almost palpable disdain.

Caster stared at the shadow for a couple of seconds and then raised his head to look at Sunny. There was a very strange expression on his face.

"What... what are you doing?"

His voice did not sound happy at all.

Sunny shrugged with a carefree smile.

"Oh, don't mind him. This cretin just lost me an ascended soul shard. As a form of punishment, I've decided to make him your shadow for a bit. So, you know. Just do your thing and don't worry about it."

The shadow turned its head and pierced him with a menacing look.

Sunny could practically hear its thoughts...

...Who are you calling a cretin, you cretin?

'That had to be it. Did I guess right, huh? Oh, sorry. I forgot you cannot answer.'

Not paying the offended shadow any more attention, he just smiled wider.

Caster frowned, hesitated for a few moments, and then said through gritted teeth:

"I would prefer if you wouldn't."

Sunny sighed.

"Ugh, alright. Whatever."

With that, he gave the shadow the command to leave the proud Legacy alone.

It separated itself from Caster, pretended to wipe its legs in disgust... and sauntered over to Nephis, only to get attached to her feet with visible delight. It even bowed gallantly to her own shadow and made sure to not get in its way.

'What... what is this moron doing?'

Of course, Sunny had ordered the shadow to approach Neph himself. But he didn't expect it to be so visibly pleased by it.

It was as if the shadow was simply beyond itself to finally follow someone competent.

'You traitor!'

Nephis looked down on the shadow, smiled, and didn't say anything.

'Well... good. Now, fight!'

The two Legacies did not make him wait long. A few moments later, they were once again locked in a furious battle. Only this time, two shadows were following Nephis.

Both of them loyally imitated her movements, however, one of them was slightly... almost imperceptibly... different.

Sunny looked at it with an intensity that threatened to burn two holes in the white marble.

Soon, his eyes widened.

'I... I see it! I think I see it!'

There, in the tiniest difference between the way Changing Star's own shadow moved and the way his shadow moved, he finally saw it.

He had found his breakthrough.

Chapter 215: Shapeless | Shadow Slave

Observing the motions of two shadows that followed Nephis, Sunny was finally able to understand the foundation of the elusive shadow style.

Before, he only sensed a hint of its essence. He knew that just like the shadow, the hidden battle art was insidious, shapeless, and everchanging. But this was where lay the problem: a battle style was, by definition, a structured framework of patterns and principles, a doctrine that dictated how one should act to defeat an enemy.

That doctrine was used as a foundation and expanded into a variety of specific movements to create a style.

But If something didn't have a shape and its form was constantly changing, how could it ever be stable and structured? Sunny had no idea how the concepts he felt were at the core of the shadow style could create something even remotely applicable to practice.

Insidious, shapeless, everchanging. What was he supposed to do with that?

But now, he understood. The key to it all was so simple and evident that he almost laughed. Why had he not guessed earlier? It was so obvious.

The idea that tied everything together was as innate to the nature of shadows as formlessness and elusiveness.

It was imitation.

After all, what were the first two things that came to mind when one thought about shadows? That they lived in the dark and imitated the things that hid them from light.

The foundation of the shadow style was indeed insidious, shapeless, and everchanging. Its core concept was to steal that which made the enemy strong and use it to destroy them.

To master that style, he had to learn how to behave like a shadow.

Sunny stared at Nephis and Caster, but didn't see them. His mind was consumed completely by the sudden revelation. He had no time to pay attention to their fight anymore.

This style... this style had endless potential. If he managed to master it, he would be able to counter any style or technique used against him, not to mention become an immensely unpredictable opponent.

What could be more unpredictable than a formless shadow?

Of course, it was easier said than done. To begin with, while the ability to imitate the enemy was incredibly powerful, it also demanded an incredible amount of talent, experience, and insight from the user. You couldn't imitate that which you didn't understand, after all.

More importantly, this was just the foundation of the style. He still had to expand it into the actual collection of specific principles... and retrain himself accordingly.

That was a mammoth task.

Creating a complete style from scratch could take a true battle master years, if not decades. Sunny had not even scratched the surface of this ambitious underetaking.

However, this was alright. It was a start. Personal battle arts were not created in an instance, anyway. It was a long and arduous process, with endless iterations coming and going while being tempered by the crucible of combat.

It's not like the style would be useless until it became perfect.

Sunny just had to get it to the point where it could be applied in battle in one form or another. That alone would tremendously enhance his technique.

He smiled, congratulating himself. However, the next moment, a deep scowl appeared on his face.

'Uh... but how, exactly, am I supposed to do that?'

A while later, when the sun was already touching the western horizon, Sunny was sitting by himself and staring at his shadow. He was motionless like a statue and deep in thought. On his face, there was a troubled frown.

When someone approached him, Sunny lingered for a few moments and then slowly looked up to see who was disturbing him.

To his surprise, it was Nephis.

The leader of their cohort stood there for a bit, her graceful figure illuminated by the setting sun. Then, she sat down near him.

Sunny blinked.

"Uh... hey Neph."

Nephis gave him a nod.

"Hey, Sunny."

He waited for a few moments, and then asked:

"...Did you want something?"

The corner of her mouth slightly curled upward. With a sigh, Changing Star glanced at him and said:

"It's nothing much. I just wanted to say that I saw you fighting in the catacombs. You have improved a lot in these three months. Well done."

Sunny smiled.

"Ah, that. Well, it's not like there's a lot of opportunities to lead a peaceful life in the Dark City. I was bound to improve a little, no?"

She shook her head.

"Don't sell yourself short. You really did well. Very few would have been able to grow so much and as fast as you. Especially without a teacher."

After hesitating for a while, Sunny shrugged.

"You said it yourself. One real battle is worth more than a thousand hours of training. There was... a lot of battles. In those three months."

Nephis nodded, and then asked:

"That firm and grounded style you weaved into your technique... where did it come from?"

He scratched the back of his head and, remembering the hellish training sessions with his pet monster, held back the urge to shiver.

"I just observed how the Stone Saint fought and tried to replicate it."

Changing Star smiled:

"As I thought. I've seen her fight, too. It's a very formidable Echo. One of the finest I've ever seen."

Coming from a Legacy, this meant a lot. Sunny was indeed really lucky to be in the right place at the right time to get the Echo of the Stone Saint. If the Fallen siblings of the iron spiders had not brought her to the brink of death, he would never have been able to survive a battle with the living statue, let alone defeat her.

He was even luckier to have a Divine Aspect that allowed him to turn Echoes into creatures that were even more fearsome.

All in all, Sunny was extremely fortunate.

His fortune was exactly as incredible as his misfortune.

He grinned.

"You know my Attributes. I do get lucky a lot."

She lingered for a few moments, and then said:

"I'm glad that you were able to understand the true design of the battle style I taught you."

So he was right on this point, too. The style Changing Star had given him was indeed designed to be as adaptable as possible and seamlessly incorporate elements of other styles. It was a perfect foundational battle art... for those talented enough to make use of it, of course.

Which were, most likely, extremely few and far between.

Sunny glanced at Nephis and, after some deliberation, asked:

"That style of yours is truly unique. Where did it come from?"

He had been too inexperienced to realize this at the time, but what Nephe had taught him could have been considered a rare treasure. The style he took for granted was, in fact, a work of pure genius. It deserved to be famous and ubiquitous.

But it was not. Which suggested that this treasure was a secret one.

Changing Star lingered for a bit, and then said:

"It's a part of my inheritance."

Sunny blinked and stared at her, stunned.

'Then... then why the hell did she teach it to me?!'

Chapter 216: Tacit Understanding | Shadow Slave

Sunny stared at Nephis with a complicated expression. After a while, he asked:

"Why did you entrust me with something so precious?"

She glanced at him, lingered for a few moments, then shrugged.

"We had a deal, remember? My knowledge in exchange for your share of the spoils we earn."

There had indeed existed such a deal. However, he had not exactly acted in good faith when proposing it. After all, he had no use for those spoils, in the first place.

Sunny scowled. If Changing Star had really revealed a family secret to him because of a lie, she had a valid reason to be resentful of him.

Just like he was of her.

With a dark smile, he looked away and said:

"You must have realized by now that I have cheated you in that deal."

Nephis turned to him and said, her voice calm and even:

"You mean the fact that you don't need to absorb soul shard to grow stronger?"

Sunny froze for a moment, then gave her a nod.

"You don't seem very surprised."

Figures. When Sunny first learned about this ability of his, he was stunned. But Nephe seemed to know a lot more than a normal person did.

She didn't even try to pretend otherwise.

"It's a very rare Aspect trait, but not unheard of among the upper echelons of the Awakened. In fact, I am capable of something like that myself. Although your case does seem to be especially unique."

Sunny glanced at her.

"How so?"

Changing Star remained silent for a few moments and then said, her voice hinted with a bit of wonder:

"Usually, when an Awakened absorbs the soul essence directly, the process leaves the remnants of the soul core empty. But when you do it, the shards are left brimming with it. This is very... unusual."

He shifted uncomfortably, and then said:

"Yeah, well... you have your share of secrets, too, Neph. Don't think that I didn't notice. Lineage Memories, Domains..."

Nephis interrupted him with a heavy gaze. When Sunny fell silent and looked at her with a frown, she said in a strangely somber tone:

"Never say those words aloud again, Sunny. I am serious. Just knowing them might get you killed."

He stared at her for a long time, and then scoffed.

"No problem. Since you showed me the courtesy of not prying into my secrets, I won't pry into yours. I don't really want to know, anyway. The mysterious "upper echelons" you mentioned can play their dirty little games all they want, as long as they leave me out of them."

Then, Sunny frowned and added:

"But there is one question I have to ask you, because it involves me personally."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Sure. Ask away."

He grimaced.

"Why are you hiding the true core of your technique from Caster?"

Changing Star looked at him for a bit, and then smiled.

"So you've noticed. That's good, too. Yes... I've been using a different style when facing Caster."

Sunny looked at her with a humorless expression.

"Why?"

She shrugged.

"Why did you incorporate elements of the Stone Saint's technique into your own?"

He shook his head.

"To become stronger. Also, nice try at misdirection, but I won't fall for your tricks. I'm the one who taught them to you, remember? So just stop. Answer my question."

Nephis sighed and turned away, glancing at the silhouette of the Crimson Spire that loomed in the distance. After a while, she said:

"I'll answer you when we return to the Dark City. It won't change anything until then, anyway. Your safety won't be compromised in any way."

'What is that supposed to mean?'

As he glared at her, Changing Star stood up and turned to leave. Before that, however, she lingered for a moment and said:

"Keep sharpening your sword, Sunny. I expect big things from you."

With that, she walked away, leaving him speechless.

'And what does she mean by that?!

After Nephis left, Sunny returned to staring at his shadow. However, despite the fact that he had figured out the essence and foundation of the elusive battle art that hid inside it, he had no idea how to go about creating an actual style out of them.

He did not have enough experience and mastery to be able to create something out of nothing. It was a dead end.

'Curses! Why even hide that damn mystery inside the Aspect if I can't do anything with it?!

Perhaps in the distant future, he would be able to. But right now, it was as though he had found the door, but was not strong enough to turn the key and unlock it. It just stood there and teased him endlessly, just like the damn Gateway inside the Crimson Spire.

It was pure torture.

'Maybe I wasn't supposed to notice the existence of the hidden style so soon...'

But he did! And he worked so hard to gain insight into its secrets. Was it all for nothing? All the pain, all the effort?

Why would Spell do this to him?

'Do you have to ask? That's the damn Spell we're talking about! Why wouldn't it do something like this to you?"

With a bitter sigh, Sunny turned away and tried to forget all about the shadow, techniques, and battle styles. It was almost dark, anyway.

'Time to sleep.'

Walking over to the center of the marble arch, Sunny lay down beside the other members of the cohort and tiredly closed his eyes.

The beach vacation was over. It was funny, visually stunning, and unexpectedly emotional... but ended on a bitter note.

Tomorrow was going to be another long day.

'To hell with this. This... this...'

Exhausted by all of it, he fell asleep before even finishing the thought.

'...this crap.'

Sunny opened his eyes and looked around in confusion.

The world was enveloped in a strange, dim twilight. Deep shadows surrounded him, shrouding the tall walls that were cut from black marble. Looking between the mighty columns, Sunny saw the black circle of the sun burning in the lightless sky.

'An... an eclipse?'

No, wait... what walls? What columns? Wasn't he supposed to be sleeping at the top of the white arch?

...What was happening?

Suddenly, a woman's scream tore the silence like a sharp knife. It was full of pain and suffering. Sunny tried to summon the Midnight Shard into his hand... only to realize that he had no hands.

Then, something else resounded from the darkness.

...A baby's cry.

'Wh—what the...'

Almost at the same time, Sunny realized something terrible.

This was a dream. He was dreaming.

...People were not supposed to dream in the Dream Realm!

'...Not good!'

Chapter 217: Origin | Shadow Slave

When Sunny realized that he was dreaming, the first thing that came to his mind was that there was another soul tree growing somewhere near the white arch. However, after a few moments of panic, he quickly dismissed this idea.

After all, he had never actually dreamt while under the mind hex of the ancient fiend. He had just mistaken the broken memories of his conversation with Cassie for a dream.

But this... this one was real.

The dreamscape that surrounded Sunny was ephemeral, shifting, and shrouded in shadows. Above him, the sun was like a circle of darkness, with crimson light drowning in a burning sea of clouds. However, none of that light reached him.

In the tenebrous hall of black marble, there was nothing but empty silence.

...Which was now destroyed by the sound of a baby crying, of course.

The woman's screams had long grown silent. Peering into the stygian depths of the dark marble hall, Sunny saw nothing but endless shadows. The baby's cries were coming from somewhere beyond them.

...Or from within them.

A subtle thought entered Sunny's mind. The monumental walls, the colossal columns, the grandiose hall... all of it looked strangely familiar. As though he had already been here once, a long time ago.

All that was missing were the signs of desolation and a large altar cut from a single block of black marble. In fact, it should have been standing right where the crying sounds were coming from.

Familiar words appeared in his mind, now full of new meaning.

'...Child of Shadows?'

In the next moment, everything disappeared.

The world was swaying. A seemingly endless surface of black stone was flowing past his vision, moving up and down.

...No, it wasn't the stone, but Sunny himself. He was the one swaying.

'Wh—what?!'

In fact, Sunny found himself in the body... of a toddler. He was currently held gently by a young woman who was walking down a long stone corridor, which was dimly lit by burning torches. Hence, the swaying.

The girl was very young, not older than Sunny himself — his actual body, that is. She was slender and exquisitely beautiful, with soft porcelain skin and long raven hair. The lissome beauty was dressed in a flowing silk tunic that left her delicate neck and shoulders exposed.

A black serpent was coiled around her arms and neck, its scales so intricately tattooed that sometimes, it seemed as though the creature was moving. Whoever marked the girl's skin with this image was a true genius of their craft. Sunny had never seen anything like it in the real world.

However, he had seen similar markings in a Nightmare.

...This was the mark of a slave who belonged to the Shadow God.

The young girl was a temple slave, just like he had been in his First Nightmare. The serpent coiled around her neck and arms served both as her collar and her shackles.

She was also the toddler's mother. Sunny could tell from the love with which she held the child and the quiet smile that appeared on her face every time she looked at him.

Sunny might have lost his own mother at a young age, but he still remembered that much, at least.

'If the mother is a slave, then the child is, too.'

Finally, Sunny began to understand what was happening to him.

The dream he found himself in did not belong to him. Instead, it belonged to the nameless temple slave whose role he had assumed during the First Nightmare.

The original child of shadows.

This vision was his memory.

Soon, the young girl entered a vast hall that was shrouded in darkness. Judging by the black marble walls, they were in another part of the ancient temple. Sunny couldn't see much of his surroundings, but he could somehow tell that they were underground.

In the center of the hall, seven tall braziers were burning with strange, pale flames. On the edges of light, motionless, stood a dozen or so people.

Sunny shivered, suddenly reminded of the silent shadows populating his Soul Sea. However, these were not ghosts, but humans. There were several other slaves, while the rest appeared to be priests.

To tell the truth, there was not a lot of difference between them. It seemed as though the servants of the Shadow God did not pursue opulence and status. In fact, many of the priests bore the same markings as the slaves, suggesting that they themselves had belonged to the temple once.

'What are they doing here? What is happening?'

Approaching one of the elder slaves, the young beauty entrusted the child to her. Separated from the warmth of his mother's chest, the toddler...

Sunny... felt cold and scared. However, the older woman consoled him with gentle words, preventing the child from crying.

Then, she moved back to stand with the rest of the people gathered in the underground hall. Their faces were calm and solemn.

The young woman, meanwhile, slowly walked into the circle of light. Her movements were elegant, flowing, and graceful.

Stopping at the very center, she stood motionlessly between the seven pale flames, surrounded by seven shadows.

Sunny stared at the beautiful slave, feeling that something important was about to happen.

But... what?

As he became pensive and uneasy, a sudden sound broke the silence. It was the deep and reverberating ringing of a zither.

As the musical instrument sang, the slave girl suddenly moved.

As she did, her seven shadows moved with her.

'This... this is...'

With his eyes wide open, Sunny watched the young woman.

She was dancing.

The beautiful slave danced in the circle of light surrounded by impenetrable darkness, her every move full of indescribable grace and clear, but elusive purpose. Her young body was flexible and lithe, but also strong and trained as much as a warrior's. Her skill as a dancer was like that of a battle master.

It was mesmerizing.

The young woman weaved a beautiful pattern with her movements, their cadence and nature simultaneously firm and flowing, sharp and gentle, clear

and unpredictable. She danced alone but also with seven partners, effortlessly controlling both her own body and the seven shadows cast by it.

At times, it was hard to tell which one of them was real.

Her dance was... insidious, shapeless, and everchanging.

Sunny froze.

He recognized these movements. They were the same as how his shadow moved.

This was the source and origin of the battle style he wanted to create

This was Shadow Dance...

Chapter 218: Shadow Dance | Shadow Slave

Sunny opened his eyes.

The grand arch of white marble was exactly the same as when he had last seen it. The sun was already climbing the grey dome of the sky, chasing the remnants of the dark sea away. The rest of the cohort had woken up some time ago and were now preparing for the journey ahead.

He had overslept.

However, it didn't matter.

With eyes burning with excitement, Sunny sat up and recalled everything that he had witnessed in his dream.

The memories were still there, clear as day. He could recall every movement, every step, every breath of the dance that the beautiful slave had performed.

..The nameless slave's mother.

His eyes dimmed slightly.

That dream of his, while a precious gift, was also a source of numerous questions. Now that he was awake, Sunny was able to see a few things with more clarity.

The scene that he had witnessed at the very beginning of it was that of the nameless slave's... the original Child of Shadow's... birth. He was born during a solar eclipse, not unlike Sunny.

That fact put a lot of things into perspective. Everyone knew that the Spell did not choose the role an Aspirant would play during their First Nightmare randomly. That was apparent from the fact that the bodies they inhabited in it, while different, were very close to their real ones.

However, the actual principle of how the Spell chose these roles and the events of the Nightmares were largely unclear.

But now, Sunny knew that he shared more than simply outer appearance with the temple slave whose body he inhabited for a few short days.

Both of them were born in similar, extremely rare circumstances. Both of them were at the very bottom of society, oppressed and unwanted, surviving against all odds instead of because of them.

Both of them were left without a family at a young age. The tough life in the outskirts took Sunny's parents and sister away. To the nameless slave, it was the servants of the mighty War God that destroyed his childhood home and life. Sunny didn't know what happened to the beautiful dancer after the last temple of Shadows was destroyed by them... but he doubted that it was anything good.

With a heavy sigh, he looked down.

...Fate. It was fate. What he shared with the temple slave was a similarity of fate.

Sunny was growing more and more convinced that the Spell was connected to the Strings of Fate in some way.

Perhaps it was weaved from them.

Remembering the void he had found himself in after completing his first trial, Sunny looked into the distance with wonder. That void was filled with a myriad of stars that served as nexuses for an inconceivably complex net made of countless strings of silver light.

Were those the strings of fate?

He shook his head.

Whatever they were, and whatever the Spell was, it was not something he could know or understand... yet. Numerous people, most of them better informed and smarter than him, had tried and failed.

It was wiser to concentrate on something within his reach.

The Shadow Dance!

Sunny smiled.

He wasn't so engrossed by the dancing of the beautiful slave girl because it was truly stunning and enchanting. He was riveted beyond belief by it because he recognized the pattern of the battle style hiding in his shadow in her graceful movements.

Turns out, it wasn't a battle art at all. It was a dance.

But was there a difference?

Not in this case, not really.

It wasn't a coincidence that people often described the way true masters of battle fought as dancing. At their core, fighting and dance were very close. That's why combat, when brought to a truly impressive level, was like a dance.

So why couldn't a dance, when mastered to perfection, be like a battle art?

Sunny was certain that he was right. He had already comprehended the essence of Shadow Dance and gained insight into its foundation. With the memory of the beautiful dancer moving as one with her seven shadows, he now had the last piece of the puzzle — the actual set of moves and principles that he could use to create an actual battle style in their image.

He didn't have the battle art yet, but he did now possess all the components needed to create it.

Of course, it was not going to be easy. Even with all that knowledge stored in his mind, he would still have to spend a lot of time and effort and spill a lot of blood, both his own and that of his enemies, to turn the graceful dance of the beautiful slave girl into a deadly dance of steel.

It wasn't even certain that he would succeed.

But Sunny would be damned if he wasn't going to try.

Shadow Dance would become his personal battle art. He was going to make it happen.

As if echoing his last thought, the familiar voice of the Spell suddenly whispered into his ear.

When Sunny heard what she said, his eyes widened.

[You have received an Aspect Legacy, Shadow Dance.]

Sunny stared into the emptiness, stunned to his core by what the Spell had just whispered.

Aspect Legacy... did it really just say those words?

He gulped.

Aspect Legacy was something that every Aspect contained, but very few Awakened ever received. Unlike the Boon of the First Nightmare, and every Nightmare after that, as well as the reward Sleepers received after returning from the Dream Realm for the first time, each Aspect Legacy had a unique set of requirements that the owner of the Aspect had to meet to unlock it.

When they did, they were rewarded with a powerful relic. Usually, it was a Memory that synergized perfectly with their Aspect Abilities, or sometimes even an Echo.

Legacy clans weren't called that accidentally. While not every clan possessed an Aspect Legacy, most of them did. In fact, it was the acquisition of the Aspect Legacy that laid the foundation for the creation of many of these clans.

By now, some of the most powerful clans even had several.

But getting an Aspect Legacy was not an easy feat. Most of them were received by Saints, followed by Master, and only a few were won by mere Awakened.

Getting the Aspect Legacy while still being a Sleeper... that was simply unheard of.

'Just like getting a True Name during the First Nightmare, I guess.'

Sunny couldn't believe his luck. Of course, he worked bitterly hard to be able to grasp it. And yet, the magnitude of the harvest he reaped was utterly unbelievable.

However... why was his Aspect Legacy not a Memory, but a battle art?

That was really strange.

Not wasting any time, Sunny summoned the runes and hungrily searched for new ones.

...What he saw made him tremble.

Chapter 219: Relics of the Past

Right there in the glimmering field of familiar runes, in the cluster describing his Aspect, a new string of them appeared.

Aspect: [Shadow Slave].

Aspect Rank: Divine.

Aspect Abilities: [Shadow Control].

Aspect Legacy: [Shadow Dance].

As soon as Sunny concentrated on the Aspect Legacy, new runes shined to describe it.

Shadow Dance Description: [Once an elegant dance, now a deadly battle art. This mysterious style was created by the treacherous Lost From Light after witnessing a graceful slave dancing with her shadows. Who else could have taken something so beautiful and turned it into something so vile?]

Sunny coughed, trying hard not to think too much about the manner in which the Spell had described him.

'Again with this treacherous stuff... I'm not that treacherous, okay? So what if I lie, manipulate, and backstab people all the time. That's just being smart...'

However, what grabbed his attention was not the description itself, but what glimmered beneath it.

Shadow Dance Mastery Level: [0/7].

First Relic: Unearned.

Second Relic: Unearned.

Third Relic...

There were a total of seven lines of runes, each promising him a Legacy Relic once he achieved the corresponding level of mastery with his newly envisioned battle style.

Seven of them!

Not one, not even two or three. But seven.

Whole Legacy Clans were created around a single Legacy Relic. Sunny couldn't even imagine what he would be able to do with seven.

Start a family and turn it into the most powerful clan in the world? No, that would mean putting all his eggs into one basket. Better create several clans!

Right! Why start a family when you can start seven?

Wait, no... that didn't sound right...

Right?

Consumed by avarice, Sunny looked at the rising sun with an excited grin. This was great! This was incredible!

However, his excitement was short-lived.

'Yeah, right. I would have to get back to the real world first. And that's not going to happen...'

Turning his head slightly, he stared at the distant silhouette of the Crimson Spire and lost himself in thought.

A while later, Effie's voice brought him back to reality.

"Hey, doofus! Breakfast is ready. Why are spacing out and smiling like an idiot?"

Sunny answered without thinking.

"Just thinking about creating a Legacy Clan. Have you ever thought about creating a clan, huh, Effie?"

The robust huntress stared at him for a few seconds with a strange expression, and then grinned.

"...Is that an invitation?"

Still lost in thought, Sunny tilted his head and glanced at her astutely.

'Huh... not bad, not bad. The choice of a partner has to be of utmost importance when starting a Legacy Clan. Take Effie, for example. She is a very fearsome Awakened. Her Aspect is extravagant and powerful beyond belief. Plus, her physique is nothing short of divine. Any heir she gives birth to is bound to be both strong and gorgeous... a very suitable candidate, I guess...'

"...Huh, what? No, not an invitation. Just considering different options."

At that moment, Sunny suddenly realized that he had been unceremoniously ogling Effie up and down for a better half of a minute, and that her grin had long turned dangerous at some point.

The huntress stretched her neck and said lazily:

"I see. So you have chosen death..."

He blinked.

"No! Wait! I didn't mean it like that! I was just, you know, theorizing!"

The unruly huntress cracked her knuckles and smiled menacingly.

"Oh, so you were "theorizing" about me, huh? Do tell, do tell..."

"No, no! Wait! Stop! Sto..."

Surprisingly, Sunny survived.

...Barely.

Soon after that, they left the grandiose marble arch and continued their journey into the depths of the Labyrinth.

Before the expedition started, Nephis had told him that they had a fast and comparatively safe way to reach the southern edges of the Forgotten Shore — as much as anything could be safe in this cursed place. Without it, getting to their destination would have taken them months.

Now that they had left the Dark City, Sunny finally decided to satisfy his curiosity and asked what that mysterious method of traveling with incredible speed was. When he heard the answer, he just stared blankly at Changing Star for a few minutes, trying to guess if she was kidding or not.

She wasn't.

In the end, he didn't even ask any questions and just waved his hand dejectedly. There was no point.

If Nephis had come to know of this secret from Cassie's visions and believed that it was doable, then he did not have to worry. Too much. It's not like he could turn back now, anyway.

Plus, the expedition had shown itself to be extremely lucrative for him so far. Mere days after its start, he had already gotten plenty of shadow fragments and an Ascended Memory, not to mention making a breakthrough in his exploration of battle styles and earning an Aspect Legacy for his effort.

In any case, they had to travel about a week's worth of time south to get the chance to access that fast method of travel. The heights they were going to use on the way as shelters during the nights there were planned in advance with the help of the Forgotten Shore map Nephis had created.

To make sure that these shelters were really where the map showed and remove any possibility of ending up stranded in the middle of the Labyrinth with no way to escape the dark sea, she had even employed Kai during the week that Sunny had spent with Effie. The charming archer scouted the way ahead and confirmed that her map was correct.

Now, the only danger they really faced from the Forgotten Shore itself was that of a sudden storm. However, with a true oracle in the ranks of the cohort, this danger was dramatically diminished. Now that Cassie had grown into her powers and absorbed a lot of soul essence, she was often able to warn them in advance if something like that was going to happen.

...There were also the usual perils of the Labyrinth, of course.

And as they went deeper into its deadly maze, the situation slowly began to turn from bad to worse.

Chapter 220: So You're a Spider, So What?

As they ventured deeper into the southern reaches of the crimson Labyrinth, the situation slowly turned worse and worse.

The iron spiders that had been not too threatening to the cohort of powerful, experienced Dark City hunters at the start of it all were growing more and more deadly with each step of the way. Their numbers grew exponentially, becoming a real danger pretty soon. More and more often bigger and stronger monsters appeared at the head of the attacking beasts, bringing with them all sorts of problems.

What's worse, the spiderweb they used to trap their prey was changing, too. The metal wires from which it was weaved became so thin that it was at times almost impossible to notice it, and sharp enough to cut through armor and bone — while maintaining the resilience of superb steel.

The whole Labyrinth was covered in it, turning from crimson to dull grey.

The cohort bled much more because of the invisible webs than they did because of the spiders themselves. Of course, the iron spiders were cunning creatures, too. More often than not, they only attacked once one of the humans was caught in their nets, leading to a few really harrowing experiences for the members of Changing Star's party.

And there was a wide variety of other terrifying creatures waiting to ambush them in the twisting pathways of the crimson coral, too. What made them so dangerous was that the cohort didn't know anything about their anatomy and abilities. Every fight was a gamble, often resulting in one or several of them sustaining serious wounds.

There were three things that made the situation somewhat bearable.

The first one was Nephis and her healing flames. Although using the Aspect Ability took a toll on their leader, it was often worth it, especially if one of the members of the cohort received wounds that limited their mobility.

One thing was far more dangerous than any Nightmare Creature that lived in the Labyrinth, and it was not reaching safety before the torrent of black water flooded the Forgotten Shore, bringing inconceivable horrors with it. Thanks to Neph, they didn't have to worry about anyone slowing the cohort down.

The second reason, unexpectedly, was the iron spiders themselves. Because of the peculiar way they hunted, a lot of creatures found their deaths in the cutting embrace of the wire spiderwebs. Finding these eviscerated corpses or cocoons containing old carcasses became a common occurrence once the party invaded the depths of the spider territory.

Thanks to that, six humans were able to study and anticipate many of the monsters they had to face in this region of the Labyrinth. A lot of potentially deadly surprises had been avoided due to the cohort stumbling onto a corpse of a similar creature prior to fighting against a living one and spending some time to learn about its strengths and weaknesses.

The third reason was the Blood Arrow. In the hands of an experienced archer, it was almost as deadly as it would have been in the hands of an inexperienced one... the difference being that the latter would mostly be a danger to themselves, quickly turning into a bloodless husk.

The first time Kai had used it, Sunny experienced a disturbing feeling of shock. That time, they were facing a large group of iron spiders led by a much larger arachnid — the awakened monster of their tribe, similar in status to a carapace centurion.

These creatures were much heavier and more powerful, with thick plates of iron armor covering their bodies almost completely. Even Caster's enchanted sword had trouble cutting through their defenses. What's worse, due to the speed with which the wretched abominations moved, it was especially hard to catch them in a gap between the armor plates.

Sunny was facing two smaller iron spiders at once while the Stone Saint was butchering the third one. With his shadow observing what was happening behind his back, he didn't miss the moment when the cunning

awakened monster suddenly disengaged from Nephis and dashed into his direction, its mandibles moving in anticipation of tasting human flesh.

Calmly preparing to dodge, Sunny tensed his muscles... and narrowed his eyes.

Whistling over his shoulder, a menacing black arrow suddenly streaked through the air. Its shaft was made out of dark polished wood, with black feathers for fletching and a vicious white arrowhead that seemed to be cut from pale white bone, like a sharp fang of some terrible creature.

The arrow easily pierced the thick iron plate protecting the spider and tore deep into his body. Even though Kai messed up his shot a bit and hit the monster in its abdomen instead of the head, the results were nothing short of harrowing.

In the next moment, the awakened monster suddenly slowed down and staggered. Then, it tried to lunge forward once again, but ended up losing its balance and quickly falling to the ground. Its limbs moved slightly, quickly losing any form of cohesion.

Their movements grew slower and slower and then stopped. Beneath the iron plates, the spider's body grew taut and shriveled, like that of a mummy. Soon, it seemed completely... drained.

Sunny blinked, shaken by this disturbing image, and couldn't help but glance briefly at his forearm.

...If not for the Blood Weave, he might have ended up as a shriveled corpse, too.

He would have gone through with cutting off his arm and survived, most likely. But if he had been a couple of seconds too late...

'Better not to think about.'

Anyway, he was glad that the Blood Arrow was on their side now.

Not too far away from him, gliding through the air, Kai suddenly made a strange gasping sound. Sunny didn't know what it felt like to have your blood magically drained and then suddenly returned to your body, but he doubted that it was pleasant.

Also, there was this question... if Kai's blood was used to create the arrow and then returned to him — if he had hit his mark, of course — then... where did the blood drained from the prey went?

He wasn't sure that he wanted to know.

In any case, with Nightingale in possession of the morbid Ascended Memory, their battles with iron spiders and other inhabitants of the Labyrinth became a bit less perilous. The Blood Arrow did not have any enchantments that needed to be activated by manipulating soul essence, so the charming archer could use it to its full potential.

Although Sunny was still a bit bitter about having to give such a menacing weapon away, he was now more confident than ever that his decision was the right one.

...Just like that, six more days passed by. During this time, he didn't gain any new Memories, but managed to accumulate eighteen more shadow fragments, bringing his total to three hundred and forty. He was still not as strong physically as he had been before creating the Shadow Saint, but getting closer and closer.

In the evening of the sixth day, bloodied and exhausted, the cohort had finally approached the goal of the first leg of their expedition.

Looking at it, Sunny couldn't help but stop in his tracks.

His eyes slightly widened.

'Of course...'

Chapter 221: Zenith | Shadow Slave

In front of them, the ground was shattered, creating a titanic fracture. The canyon was so deep and vast that Sunny had to strain his eyes to see the other side of it. Crimson coral clung to its walls, spilling over the edge like a torrent of blood.

A long time ago, a graceful bridge of white stone connected the two sides of the canyon together. Now, however, it was broken, with only its base remaining in place.

Looking at the bridge, Sunny realized that there must have been an ancient road somewhere beneath their feet. It led directly to the main gates of the ancient city, moving across the colossal canyon by means of the miraculous bridge and passing beneath the grandiose arch of white marble.

Come to think of it, the headless knight, the Ashen Barrow, and the graceful woman whose hands had saved him twice were also situated in a straight line. Perhaps there was another road leading east, too.

However, this thought disappeared from his head as quickly as it had appeared. All his attention was drawn to the remnants of the stone bridge, where...

Stood another giant statue.

Right above the weathered ruins stood a colossal stone warrior. He was clad in an archaic cuirass, with a beautiful spear resting on his shoulder. The warrior was facing south, as though greeting the travelers who traveled on the road to reach the ancient city.

...Of course, his head was missing.

More than that, the whole statue was covered in vast sheets of dull grey spiderweb, as if dressed in a solemn burial shroud. Sunny shivered, afraid to imagine what kind of creature was capable of creating the thick metal cables of the web that encompassed the stone colossus.

Noticing his expression, Effie smiled.

"Scary, huh?"

Sunny gave her a nod, hoping against all hope that they would not have to find out the answer to his question.

For once, his hopes were not shattered to pieces.

The vivacious huntress sighed.

"I haven't seen it myself, but I heard stories of the creature that used to make its nest here. It was the mother of all these damnable spiders we've been dealing with for the past week. A huge menace of a Nightmare Creature, as big as a house and utterly deadly. Armored like a hover tank, too."

Sunny gulped and cast a sideways look at Nephis.

"What's a hover tank?"

Effie blinked a couple of times, then answered in an amused tone:

"Oh, right! You're a school dropout, I almost forgot. You've seen a PTV before, right? PTV stands for a "personal transport vehicle", as you know. I hope. Well, a tank is sort of like that, only much bigger and heavier, with thick armor and a kinetic or energy cannon installed on it. The government sometimes employs them to support Awakened when a Gate opens near populated areas."

Sunny tried to imagine such a vehicle and hazily remembered seeing something like this on the news when he was a kid. Mostly, these tanks Effie had described were shown opened like tin cans, with their crews pulled out and eaten by attacking monsters.

He shivered. Mundane people had no business fighting against Nightmare Creatures.

To be completely honest, even Awakened were had no business facing them. It's just that they had no other choice.

"...We're not going to try and kill that big spider, are we?"

Effie laughed.

"Actually, it's you lucky day. We won't be meeting the Spider Mommy. In fact, no one ever will. She's long dead."

Sunny sighed with relief and glanced at the huntress:

"Yeah, great. But how do you know?"

She shrugged.

"She was killed by the second ruler of the Bright Castle — before he went and got himself killed trying to conquer the Crimson Spire. The huntress who showed me the ropes when I arrived on the Forgotten Shore had actually been one of the members of his cohort once, if you can believe it. In fact, she was the one who dealt the finishing blow to that abomination."

Effie looked at the giant mass of spiderwebs and shook her head.

"It must have been one hell of a battle, huh? Anyway, I'm glad that she did. That's how she received the Zenith Shard, which I then inherited."

Sunny frowned.

"What exactly are you talking about?"

The huntress leaned on her beautiful bronze spear and patted its shaft.

"My spear. It's a tier-five Awakened Memory, so the big bad spider was an awakened tyrant, I guess. Can you imagine? All these creepy crawlers serving a sentient commander. Thank gods it's dead."

Sunny looked at her with a dubious expression.

"Why would that mentor of your gave away such a treasure?"

Effie was silent for a few moments, then smiled.

"Ah, we were kind of close. Plus, she had no idea how to use a spear. Sorcerers, am I right? In any case, she gave the Zenith Shard to me."

Despite her carefree tone, he could tell that that smile was fake. Effie did not let it show, but Sunny could tell that the death of this huntress whose name he didn't even know had met affected her more than she was telling.

Who knows. Since Effie's original cohort had perished in the catacombs, their corpses might still be somewhere there, in those cursed tunnels.

However, something else was on his mind.

Sunny furrowed his brow. Midnight Shard, Zenith Shard. Was there a connection? He didn't know.

There might have been. He had received the Midnight Shard from Nephis, who had gotten it after killing the Carapace Demon.

The Demon, even though it had been enthralled by the Soul Devourer, appeared as the leader of the Nightmare Creature in that region of the Labyrinth... just like the brood mother of the iron spiders had been.

Two headless statues, two powerful abominations, two Memories with similar names. Wasn't it a little bit too much to be a coincidence?

Glancing at Effie, he asked:

"Was your spear forged from a shard of a fallen star, by chance?"

Just as he said it, Cassie slightly turned her head, listening to their conversation. That small detail told Sunny everything he wanted to know.

The huntress raised her eyebrows.

"It was, at least according to its description. Who told you?"

A corner of Sunny's lips slightly curled upward.

"No one. I just guessed."

With that, he left Effie alone and walked forward.

It seemed as though he was right. There was some hidden meaning behind the names of these two Memories. Cassie seemed to know something about it, and that meant that Nephis did, too.

And yet, they chose to keep it from Sunny and the rest of the cohort.

He sighed.

'So this expedition is not as simple as it seems.'

Not that it ever seemed particularly simple, to begin with.

He had guessed a long time ago that Changing Star had some hidden motive to want to leave the Dark City, but now, his suspicions were as good as confirmed.

The smile disappeared from Sunny's face.

He didn't like being kept in the dark at all.

'Kept in the dark, huh. Oh, the irony...'

At that moment, his shadow reached the base of the giant statue. With a deep frown, Sunny summoned the Midnight Shard and glanced at Nephis, putting all needless thought aside.

"There's a nest ahead. We will have to destroy it to access the statue. Lots of spiders... some bigger ones, too."

She gave him a nod and turned to face the others.

"We need to clear the nest and climb the statue before the sun sets. Prepare for battle..."

Chapter 222: Clearing the Nest

A clear and melodic sound of a ringing bell reverberated through the air above the Labyrinth, alerting the monstrous spiders hiding in the enormous cocoon of grey webs that a new prey came knocking on their door.

Moments later, swift bodies clad in heavy plates of iron armor shot from beneath the grey spiderweb, moving through the steel wires with terrifying speed. There were enough Nightmare Creatures in that wave to obliterate anything that stood in their way... seemingly.

However, what stood in their way were two figures — one tall and boisterous, the other one on the shorter side and radiating a strange feeling of indifferent firmness.

They were Effie and the Stone Saint. Both held their shields raised, the tips of their weapons resting on their edges. As the huntress grinned, the Shadow silently struck the rim of her shield with the blade of her sword twice.

As if answering that call, a vicious black arrow suddenly appeared from somewhere above, hitting the leading spider right in one of its many eyes. The monster's legs buckled, and it fell to the ground, forcing those creatures that followed behind to either dash around or jump over the massive body.

A fraction of a second later, the wave of spiders crashed into the small shield wall. A deafening roar of iron striking against iron resounded under the grey skies of the Forgotten Shore like a thunderclap. Despite the furious force of the assault, Effie and the Stone Saint somehow held — at least for now.

As soon as the momentum of the iron spiders was slowed down a little, Nephis and Caster appeared out of nowhere and attacked the mass of repulsive creatures from the sides. At the same time, a stonelike sword and a beautiful bronze spear lashed out from behind the shields.

Black blood splashed into the air.

Meanwhile, Sunny softly landed on the ground behind the Nightmare Creatures and stealthily moved through the shadows, swiftly approaching them from the back. The Midnight Shard flashed, sending one of the spiders into the embrace of death.

[You have slain an awakened beast...]

Without listening to the Spell, Sunny used the precious moments before the enemy noticed his presence to wreck as much havoc as possible. His tachi moved twice more, severing several limbs and heavily wounding another abomination. After that, the spiders finally reacted to his treacherous attack...

'Not treacherous... just... smart!'

With Effie and the Stone Saint holding the front, Nephis and Caster attacking from the sides, and Sunny closing the trap from behind, the monstrous arachnids were now surrounded from all sides.

...Well, sort of.

Of course, a small group of dormant humans could never hope to truly surround this many superior Nightmare Creatures, not even with the help of a monster of their own. Trapped or not, as soon as the iron spiders had the time to react, they could easily overwhelm and tear them to pieces.

Especially Sunny, who was behind the line these vicious creatures and all alone. If the spiders decided to shift the focus of their attack, he would be dead in seconds.

As another black arrow hit one of the larger spiders in the abdomen, Sunny hissed and dove under a spider scythe, then thrust his sword forward, ruthlessly piercing the head of the beast through its open, salivating mouth.

[You have...]

With no time to tear the Midnight Shard from the spider's corps, Sunny let go of its hilt and jumped back, narrowly avoiding being crushed by another ironclad creature.

The few seconds of the advantage they had were coming to an end. A moment or two later, the spiders were bound to come to their senses. Even though the cohort had managed to kill ten or so in this short window of time, there were still enough of the deadly creatures to rip them to shreds.

Sunny didn't even have to look at Nephis to feel the shift in her movements. The silent understanding the two of them developed during their journey through the Labyrinth many months ago was still there, allowing them to cooperate perfectly without the need to use any words, as though they were two parts of the same whole.

In fact, despite the rift in their relationship, this bond was stronger than ever.

Perhaps because they understood each other so much better now... for better or for worse.

Ah, it was so exhilarating to fight side by side with Changing Star once again...

Just before the spiders were able to turn the tide of the battle in their favor, Effie and the Stone Saint — who was following Sunny's command — suddenly moved to the sides.

Nephis, Caster, and Sunny braced themselves.

Behind the improvised shield wall stood Cassie. She was holding a wooden staff in her hands, while an elegant rapier hovered in the air above her shoulder.

The tip of the rapier pointed directly at the spiders. As though following the direction of the Quiet Dancer's blade, Cassie moved her staff and activated its enchantment.

Immediately, a powerful gust of hurricane wind slammed into the mass of the Nightmare Creatures, sending several of them reeling and throwing clouds of dust into the air. Of course, it wasn't strong enough to truly throw these abominations off their balance or damage them in any way.

However, that wasn't the plan.

Spider kin of these creatures back on Earth had a uniquely powerful sense of hearing. Which was rather strange, considering that they had no organs that resembled ears at all. The truth of the matter was that spiders were able to feel the vibrations of sound waves.

They were also masterful architects, using the vibrations in the specially created threads weaved into their webs to sense the movements of their prey from afar.

These Nightmare Creatures were much the same. As the powerful wind threw dust into the air and made every wire of every surrounding spiderweb vibrate all at once, they were momentarily disoriented.

The members of the cohort were waiting for this exact moment. Instantly, they attacked with ferocious determination, spilling rivers of viscous black blood onto the ground. Sunny himself had already gotten his austere sword back, and now used its razor-sharp blade to gut the beast that had forced him to retreat a couple of seconds ago.

[You have slain...]

By the time the iron spiders came back to their senses, their numbers were significantly diminished.

...But there were still so many of them.

After that, the battlefield became consumed with chaos. There was no time for plans or tactics anymore. Every member of the cohort had to face off against multiple opponents, fighting with desperate resolve against enemies that surpassed them both in terms of personal power and numbers.

Only the Stone Saint was calm and indifferent, moving through the ranks of the iron spiders like a graceful incarnation of pure darkness.

The battle fell apart into several small pockets of fearsome violence. Kai was trying to support his companions from above, but with how intense the fighting got, he was having trouble finding the opportunities to take shots without risking hitting them.

He was too afraid to take a risk, knowing all too well how harrowing the effects of the Blood Arrow were. If even the Nightmare Creatures of higher rank were doomed to succumb to a torturous death after being wounded by the ghastly Memory, humans like them had no chance of surviving.

For now, people on the ground were on their own.

...Sunny was struggling against two ironclad abominations, gritting his teeth in exasperation. The damn bastards were too fast to reliably hit them in the gaps in armor and too damn powerful to face them directly. As the result, he was forced to constantly dance between the two of them, dodging the whirlwind of strikes that rained on him from all sides.

"Curses!"

Jumping back, he held the Midnight Shard with one hand and used another to throw the Prowling Thorn in the direction of one of the spiders. The creature easily dodged the kunai and continued its attack, threatening to slice Sunny's hand clean off.

He had no choice but to retreat once again.

...Behind the menacing beast, the throwing dagger continued to spin. A few moments later, it cut a smooth arch in the air and flew back, as if turning into a boomerang.

Sadly, just like the spiders back on Earth, these repulsive creatures had an almost absolute field of vision. The second spider simply moved its head down at the last moment without even bothering to turn it, dodging the heavy kunai that approached it from behind.

But Sunny was never trying to wound the Nightmare Creatures with the Prowling Thorn, to begin with. Instead, he wanted to let them taste their own medicine.

A moment later, the invisible string of his kunai drew taut, wrapped around two massive bodies. Just like prey used to be caught in their webs, the iron spiders were now caught by the invisible string of the Prowling Thorn, tripping over it and crashing into each other.

Sunny dashed forward and let the Midnight Shard sing. The graceful blade flashed twice, sending two ugly spider heads spinning into the air.

[You have slain an awakened beast, Iron Spider.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Kicking one of the heads away, Sunny swiftly glanced around, searching for a new enemy.

But there were none.

[...You have slain an awakened beast, Iron Spider.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

[You have received a Memory.]

The gargantuan cocoon of steel spiderwebs was empty. Corpses of its previous inhabitants littered the ground, oozing with black blood.

The cohort had cleared the entire nest full of Awakened abominations.

No matter how incredible, this was the undeniable truth.

They had won.

Chapter 223: Natural Selection | Shadow Slave

The danger was gone, so Sunny allowed himself to tiredly kneel on the ground, his breathing heavy and laborious. The strenuous battle against the host of spiders had not lasted long, but he was utterly exhausted. The intensity of these perilous minutes was enough to bring anyone down to their knees.

'Too weak. I am still too weak.'

With a heavy sigh, he summoned the runes and glanced at the number of shadow fragments.

Shadow Fragments: [362/1000].

Not bad. Clearing the nest had given him twenty-two fragments — ten for the five iron spiders he had killed himself, and another twelve for those slain by the Shadow Saint.

With the taciturn monster serving as his murderous pet, the speed with which Sunny was able to accumulate power was twice as fast, at least. If things continued like this, the Stone Saint was going to return his investment of a hundred shadow fragments in no time.

'If I live long enough.'

With a grimace, Sunny dismissed the Midnight Shard and slowly got up. The sun was already rolling down toward the horizon, so they had to hurry with collecting soul shards from the corpses of the iron spiders.

There were a lot of corpses...

Cutting one of the beasts open with the Prowling Thorn, Sunny struggled with the idea that they had eviscerated this many Nightmare Creatures. Of course, he had expected this much. After all, Nephis and Sunny had been able to fight against two or three carapace scavengers back when it was

only the two of them. Both of them were much weaker, less experienced, and barely equipped with Memories back then, too.

Now that they had spent seven whole months in the Dream Realm — many times more than most Sleepers ever had to — and tempered themselves against the perilous hellscape of the Forgotten Shore, both their skill and level of power had dramatically increased.

Add the fact that there were two other powerhouses fighting alongside them, as well as Nightingale and the menacing Stone Saint, and the outcome of the battle ceased to be that surprising.

And yet, observing the carnage that they had left if their wake still made Sunny doubt his eyes.

These were Awakened Nightmare Creatures, still.

The real reason why the cohort had won did not lie in the individual prowess of its members, but in their ability to cooperate and control the battlefield. The iron spiders were powerful and deadly, but at the end of the day, they were still mindless beasts. That's why they had allowed themselves to be surrounded and trapped.

Had they been commanded by a creature of a higher Class, one that was as cunning and smart as the humans it faced, things would have turned out very differently.

Sunny sighed.

Come to think of it, the Labyrinth was a curious place. It teemed with abominable creatures of all kinds, but almost all of them were of the mindless variety. The only two exceptions he knew about were the Carapace Demon and the Spider Matriarch, who had been either a devil or a tyrant.

ρ□□□□ □□□□□ Perhaps it was just the nature of this place. Nothing too big and strong could escape from the flood of black water that drowned the world every night. Only comparatively small monsters were able to run

away or hide — both from the dark sea itself and from the hungry terrors that inhabited it.

These monsters were an almost insurmountable threat to those unfortunate young people who were sent to this forsaken hell by the Spell, but by the standards of the Forgotten Shore itself, they were nothing but insects.

A horde of parasites who fed on the crumbs left behind by the true masters of this place. pa□□a □□□□□

'What a depressing thought.'

This notion poured cold water on Sunny's pride over their achievement.

'Well. Whatever...'

Soon, they were done with the gruesome job of fishing out the soul shards out of the dead spiders. While Nephis was dividing the spoils among the members of the cohort, Sunny used the chance to dive into his Soul Sea and inspect the Memory he had received during the battle.

It turned out to be a cloak weaved from spider silk. Judging from the description, the cloak could provide him with a small amount of protection against physical attacks, simple by virtue of being very hard to piece.

Without thinking too much, Sunny fed the cloak to the Stone Saint. It was just a tier-one Memory, so no amount of protection it could provide would be of any help in this damned place. He would also rather kill himself than go into a battle while wearing a cloak. There were easier and less painful ways to die.

Plus, it was white. Didn't exactly go along with the dark grey fabric of the Puppeteer's Shard, not to mention being a hindrance to anything having to do with stealth.

The Stone Saint absorbed another shadow fragment, at least.

Receiving his share of the soul shards and entrusting them to Effie, who had more than enough space in her enchanted bag, Sunny glanced at Nephis.

Changing Star was looking at the sun, calculating something in her head. After a few moments, she sighed and said:

"We still have some time. Let's explore the nest before ascending the statue."

Sunny grinned.

As an amateur explorer, this was exactly what he wanted to hear.

The nest was formed by endless wires of the strange metal web and resembled a vast sphere. It was built around one of the legs of the stone colossus, effectively blocking the path to the bridge.

The entrance was situated high above the ground, and extremely wide. Looking at the diameter of that hole gave Sunny an understanding of just how big the Spider Matriarch had been.

He shivered. The second lord of the Castle had been a very powerful individual. Sunny didn't even want to imagine what the battle with the giant arachnid must have looked like.

Inside, it was dark and damp. Drops of black water were falling from above, creating an ominous melody.

Peering into the darkness, Sunny suddenly stumbled and froze for a moment.

This... he didn't expect.

Chapter 224: Pyre | Shadow Slave

Inside the giant nest of spiderwebs, a desiccated corpse of the colossal Matriarch lay shriveled on the floor, its iron carapace shattered by some devastating blow. The creature was long dead, but the sight of it was still terrifying.

The vast abdomen of the brood mother, however, appeared to have been severed much later than her fatal battle against the Lord of the Bright Castle. It almost looked as if it was... torn apart from within. Inside the terrifying wound, Sunny noticed the shattered remnants of five giant, metallic eggs.

The size of them was about the same as that of the five monstrous Fallen Beasts that had destroyed the original Stone Saint and her brethren back in the Dark City.

'So... that was where they came from.'

Looking away with a shiver, Sunny noticed numerous cocoons of spiderwebs attached to the walls of the nest all around the dead Matriarch. Inside them, withered carcasses of Nightmare Creatures of all shapes and sizes were preserved in a strangely good condition.

This was a true museum of terror.

The Nightmare Creatures appeared as though they were kept alive inside the cocoons for a long, long time before finally succumbing to death and turning into mummified corpses. Perhaps the abominable spiders stored them there for later consumption.

Or... not.

Noticing a few cocoons that had been broken open and what was inside of them, Sunny had to try hard to stop himself from vomiting.

The iron spiders did not use the monsters caught in the cocoons for food.

...They used them as incubators.

The creatures in the broken cocoons had been devoured from within. A few of them still had hundreds of small, moist eggs embedded into their flesh, with embryonic spiderlings moving weakly behind the slightly transparent shells.

'Curse... it all...'

Damn these spiders, damn the Labyrinth, damn the Forgotten Shore... and especially damn the damned Nightmare Spell that had brought him here. Sunny suddenly felt tired of this long, feverish, neverending nightmare he had found himself in.

But the worse was still to come.

He was the first to notice it. With a dark grimace suddenly appearing on his face, Sunny called out to his companions. Then, he led them deeper into the nest, where, attached to the wall, hung a cocoon that was different from all the others.

Because this one hid a rough silhouette of a human body.

The six of them stood somberly around the cocoon, each consumed by their own dark thoughts. Finally, Nephis turned her head to Caster and said:

"Can you sword cut it open?"

With a short nod, the proud Legacy summoned the enchanted jian and took a step forward. Approaching the cocoon, he stopped and hesitated for a few moments.

"Be careful."

Glancing back at Changing Star, Caster lingered for a second, and then faced the cocoon with grim determination written on his face. As ghostly green light emanated from the blade of his sword, he swung it with the graceful precision of an expert swordsman.

The tip of the jian cut through the metal wires of the cocoon, splitting it open. A shriveled human body fell to the floor, making the Legacy jump back.

Nephis, Caster, and Sunny stared at it, their faces pale and full of ghastly resentment. Then, Sunny bent over and emptied the contents of his stomach.

...This was just too much.

The young man whose corpse they found in this harrowing place did not die an easy death. In fact, being eaten alive from the inside by a hundred of tiny Nightmare Creatures was probably the worst fate imaginable. At least Sunny couldn't think of anything worse.

But even worse still, he recognized the dead Sleeper.

His face was strangely intact, with an expression of horrifying agony frozen on it forever. Despite the overall condition of the corpse, Sunny knew who it was just from one look.pa□□a □□□□□

It was the young man who had attended the Academy with them, the one who had called him a shorty when Sunny first approached Caster to create the impression that he was a boastful lunatic.

Looking at their condition, Effie frowned:

"Did you guys know him?"

After a few moments of silence, Caster slowly nodded.

"Yes. His name is... his name was Stephen. He was the youngest heir of the Pandavar clan.

'Stephen...'

Sunny had not even bothered to learn the name of this arrogant young man back when they were preparing to venture into the Dream Realm at the Academy. In fact, he had really disliked him, and for a good reason.

ρ□□□□ □□□□□ But looking at the hideous, terrifying corpse in front of him, he had forgotten all about it. Sunny would never wish this fate on anyone, let alone one of his fellow students.

Slowly, a solemn mood took overtook the cohort. They had already known that the other three Sleepers sent to the Forgotten Shore this year never made it to the Dark City, which meant that they had perished somewhere in the Labyrinth. However, finding one of them served as a stark reminder of how fragile their own lives were.

Who knew what would happen to them in the future? If not today, death could be waiting for them tomorrow. Perhaps years from now, it would be their corpses that someone would stumble upon by accident.

Some time later, Nephis gritted her teeth and turned away. Then, she said, her voice suppressed and hollow:

"We need to leave. The sun is setting."

Her words broke the silence and brought everyone back from their grim reveries. Caster lingered for a few minutes, then spoke in a hesitant tone:

"Aren't we... aren't we going to bury him?"

Changing Star shook her head.

"There's not enough time. I also don't want anyone touching the bodies infected with these eggs. It's too dangerous."

The members of the cohort looked at each other. No one had a reasonable objection, but it felt wrong to just leave their fellow human here.

Finally, Nephis sighed. A complicated expression appeared on her face, and then she said:

"...Alright. Go. I'll catch up with you guys later."

Sunny stared at her for a few moments, and then slowly turned away. One after another, the five of them glanced at Changing Star and left, leaving her

alone with the dead young man and numerous cocoons, each hiding a slain Nightmare Creatures.

As soon as the last member of the cohort climbed out of the nest, a beam of pure radiance suddenly shot from the dark hole of its entrance, followed by a wave of scorching heat. The purifying fire unleashed by Changing Star engulfed the remains of their fellow student and then spread to the numerous cocoons, the Nightmare Creatures inside of them, and even the corpse of the Spider Matriarch herself.

The insides of the nest turned into an incandescent, incinerating furnace. Everything inside of it was doomed to be annihilated and turn to ashes.

A few minutes later, the whole structure was consumed by furious white flames.

Nephis had escaped the burning nest shortly after the rest of her cohort, her face pale and tired.

Leaving the grandiose funeral pyre behind, they began ascending the statue of the ancient warrior.

The night was approaching.

Chapter 225: On The Shoulders Of Giants

Once they climbed all the way to the broad shoulders of the statue and found a suitable place to make camp, everyone looked down without having to say anything.

Far below them, the giant nest was still aflame. The cables that constituted it were melting and turning into rivers of liquid metal, flowing down from the edges into the vast abyss of the canyon.

The turbulent black waters were rising from below to meet them. When the two streams met — one lightless, the other incandescent — billowing columns of hot vapor shot into the air. For a few moments, it seemed as though light and darkness were on equal footing.

But then the cursed sea rose from the depths of the canyon in a surge and washed away the brightness of melting iron away. The flood of blackness crashed into the burning nest, dousing it.

A minute or so later, the white flames were gone. The surface of the dark sea continued to rise, as though nothing had ever happened.

Sunny sighed and turned to Nephis.

Now that they had reached their goal, it was time to face the real danger. With a grim expression on his face, he asked:

"So... now what?"

He knew the general concept of how she was planning to reach the southern edges of the Forgotten Shore in a short time, but not the details.

Changing Star glanced at him, lingered for a moment, and then said:

"We arrived at the canyon faster than I expected. There are still two days left before we can act. So, make yourself at home. We'll rest tomorrow and start preparing for it the next day."

Sunny smiled.

Rest... that sounded swell.

Plus, he wasn't really looking forward to making use of the "fast and comparatively safe" method of traveling through the Labyrinth that Nephis had talked about.

In fact, he would rather never have to use it at all.

Just like that, the cohort found itself with nothing to do for the next two days. Before leaving the Dark City, Changing Star had anticipated that various things could slow them down and padded the schedule of the expedition with extra time.

Who knew that they would actually make it to the broken bridge so fast?

In any case, Sunny wasn't complaining. He had a lot to do and think about.

For example, the mysterious connection between his tachi, Effie's spear, and the headless statues that stood around the Forgotten Shore.

The statues represented the seven valiant heroes that had made an oath to return light to this cursed land thousands of years ago. Sunny had seen three of them by now: the knight, the graceful woman, and now this mighty warrior.

Did every statue have a connection with a specific Memory? If so, what was that connection and why was Nephis so reluctant to share this information with everyone? pa□□a □□□□□

Well... it wasn't like he and Changing Star were very close now. Sunny had drawn a clear line to denote the nature of their relationship himself. He insisted that he was not a true member of the cohort, but merely a hired specialist.

Why would she share her secret with him?

This was a logical conclusion, but Sunny couldn't help but feel a bit resentful.

Despite the fact that he was her first partner, now, the situation had changed. Nephis had other people to rely on... like Caster.

So why would she say that Sunny was the only person she trusted on the Forgotten Shore except for Cassie, and then hide her technique from Caster?

ρ□□□□ □□□□□ Everything felt so complicated.

In any case, there was an invisible line drawn between the core members of the hunting party and the outsiders — Sunny and Kai.

No one consciously avoided them, but it was clear that the line existed. When all was said and done, the four true members of the cohort preferred each other's company. That's why Sunny and Kai ended up spending a lot of time together, chatting about this and that and generally having a nice time.

Honestly, Sunny couldn't complain. As far as companions went, the charming archer was not the worst option.

Plus, their conversations were extremely entertaining.

Kai had a lot of fun stories about his life as a celebrity, while Sunny had plenty of macabre anecdotes about his life in the outskirts.

Their life experiences were so vastly different that it was almost as if they were from different worlds. As a result, both felt like they were listening to fictional stories about some strange and fantastical land that they had never heard about before.

Sunny spent the rest of his time training with the sword, trying to turn Shadow Dance from an ethereal concept into a practical set of core principles. The progress was painfully slow, but now there was progress, at least.

He was having so much trouble because his chosen battle style was so strange and elusive. Unlike most styles, which started with certain movements and steps, this one was supposed to imitate any movement and any step instead of introducing its own.

So it was more about the state of mind and the flexibility of his physical behavior. Sunny had to create a set of training exercises that would allow his body and muscle memory to become capable of adapting to any style and turn pliable like a shadow.

On the first day of trying, his whole body ached. Despite his incredible physical shape and experience with tough training, Sunny ended up straining the muscles that he didn't even know he had, and force those that he did know about to behave in a way that was utterly different from what they were used to.

Actually, his previous training was even detrimental to the whole process. He had to make himself unlearn a lot of things to allow for this strange style to take root in his very bones. Thankfully, the foundation of his technique was Changing Star's flowing style, which itself was designed for maximum adaptability.

If Sunny learned another style or was further into mastering any existing technique, this would have been ten times harder, if not impossible.

...Needless to say, his exercises were in no way similar to the beautiful and graceful dance he had seen in his dream. In fact, from the side, Sunny must have looked as though he was having a seizure. He caught more than one amused stare while practicing.

It didn't matter.

The only thing that mattered was that he was slowly pushing himself toward mastering the basics of Shadow Dance... and, hopefully, receiving his first Relic.

Chapter 226: The Fool | Shadow Slave

On the evening of the first of the two days that they had at their disposal, Sunny climbed all the way to the highest point of the statue and sat there alone, looking at the setting sun.

He felt as though he had to find a sense of balance that he had lost at some point along the way. Not because he missed it, but because he was going to need that balance to remain firm and steady when the moment of truth came.

If he was right about the future, then this was probably the last day of peace he would experience until this whole thing was over. Not only the expedition...

But all of it.

Looking back, his behavior in these past few months was highly erratic. Where were the cold rationality and ruthlessness that saved him so many times in the past? The caution and devious cunning that allowed him to survive the First Nightmare? He had not been acting like himself for a long time.

Yes, his mental state had suffered greatly because of everything that had happened. But was it the only reason?

Come to think of it...

The first blow dealt to him was the bitter revelation that there was no Gateway in the Bright Castle. After everything that Sunny had endured to make it to the Dark City, the crushing intensity of their journey through the Labyrinth, the diabolical trap of the Soul Devourer and their escape from it, the cold and harrowing night of traversing the dark sea... all of it turned out to have been for nothing.

Not only were they not rewarded for their efforts, but all of their hopes were mercilessly destroyed and obliterated instead.

This alone was enough to drive a person mad.

Then came the feeling of alienation he felt while living with Nephis, Cassie, and all the newcomers in the outer settlement. Instead of finding support and solace in the company of his friends, Sunny fell into his old habit. Unconsciously, he turned himself into an outcast to prevent anyone from making him one.

This was the most noticeable, but not the only instance of him regressing to his old self. After fighting so hard to change and grow, Sunny ended up abandoning most of the lessons he had learned after becoming infected by the Nightmare Spell.

He was almost like an addict relapsing after a few days of sobriety and giving up completely because of this one small mistake.

But who could blame him?

Sunny was already shaking under the pressure of the situation. One little push, and he would fall under its weight.

In the end, it was not one, but three blows that shattered him completely. As though the world wanted to make sure that he was truly broken.

First was the terrible epiphany of what Cassie's vision really meant. Almost instantly after that, while Sunny was still reeling, came the fatal mistake in the conversation with Harper and the brutal murder that followed. And if that was not enough, the person he relied on the most to keep his sanity in this cursed place, Nephis, made it impossible for him to trust her any longer.

Anyone would have collapsed under that weight. And yet Sunny managed to keep his balance, even if just barely.

The final straw that finally broke him was the excruciating, neverending sea of torturous pain he suffered after being mortally wounded by the Black Knight.

After that, Sunny had relinquished all pretense of having control.

And now here he was. Playing the fool, acting like a fool, and fooling around with Kai and Effie. Wasn't it fun? Wasn't it easy?

Yes, his mental state wasn't great.

But it was also very convenient to blame everything on this condition. The truth of it...

The truth of it was that Sunny did not try to reign himself in at all. In fact, he welcomed this madness. Being a bit crazy was comforting, simple, and safe.pa□□a □□□□□

It protected him from having to look at the heartbreaking truth and remember it. Sunny needed the shield of madness to save himself from the bottomless despair that threatened to destroy him completely.

So what if he was prone to act recklessly in this state? So what if he made mistakes here and there and took unnecessary risks? Anything was better than having to face that despair.

Just like Nephis had said, one had to become a little insane to survive in the world that had gone mad.

...And yet, Sunny knew that what he was doing was nothing but hiding his head in the sand.

And now that the end was approaching, he had to stop hiding from the truth. He had to admit and endure it.

This was the only way for him to survive.

...As the sun disappeared behind the horizon and the absolute darkness drowned the Forgotten Shore, he sighed deeply and whispered:

"Alright. Alright. It's time to wake up."

The next day, six humans were standing at the edge of the vast canyon as the twilight of dusk drowned the world in shadows. Far below them, the black waters of the cursed sea were raging, rising from the depths in a terrifying, obliterating wave.

In a few minutes, all light was going to be completely gone. And then, the flood of darkness would wash over the world, destroying anyone left standing in its path.

...And yet, the humans were not rushing to get away. Instead, they just stood there and waited.

Looking down into the canyon, Sunny gritted his teeth and shivered. Then, he glanced at Nephis and licked his dry lips.

"Are you sure about this?"

Changing Star did not spare him a look and simply nodded. Despite the fact that the rising black water was quickly approaching them, her face was calm and composed.

A moment later, the last vestiges of sunlight disappeared, leaving them in utter darkness. The silence that surrounded them was broken only by the sound of waves rushing against the walls of the canyon.

Getting closer and closer.

ρ□□□□ □□□□□ "Prepare yourselves."

Sunny sighed.

'Here we go.'

Suddenly, a blinding burst of white light pierced the darkness. Holding the incandescent sword in her hand, Nephis closed her shining eyes for a second...

And then raised the sword high above her head, as if calling the monsters of the depths to come take her.

Chapter 227: Comparatively Safe | Shadow Slave

The embrace of impenetrable darkness was broken by the furious white light of Changing Star's incandescent sword. Illuminated by it, six people were standing on the shore of a raging river. Their faces were pale and grim.

The canyon had disappeared, consumed by the rising surge of the black water. Now, the cursed sea was flowing over its edges, ready to swell and flood the narrow passages of the great Labyrinth in an unstoppable wave.

Sunny felt cold water wash over his feet and shivered. The rest of the cohort reacted exactly the same — even Kai, who could escape into the lightless skies at any moment, seemed to be deeply unnerved by the closeness of the encroaching sea.

Among the six of them, only three had truly experienced the perils of this dark abyss. They knew that the real dread came not from the sea itself, but from the terrors that hid in its cursed depths.

Like the host of the of whispering voices that they had heard beneath the branches of the Soul Tree.

Or the gargantuan creature that had almost cost Nephis her life.

However, Sunny was not going to make a remark to educate the rest of the cohort. After all, what they were trying to do right now was to summon one of these terrors from below.

One that was different from all the others.

"Sunny?"

Peering into the darkness, he lingered.

"I don't see anything... yet."

The water was already to his shins and rising swiftly. Sunny grimaced and struggled with the desire to turn around and run away without looking back.

If he was fast enough... if he was lucky enough... he could still make it to the giant statue before the torrent of darkness drowned him under its crushing weight.

Instead, Sunny glanced at Nephis and Cassie.

The blind girl had glimpsed this secret of the Forgotten Shore in her visions and shared it with Changing Star. Changing Star had devised a plan to make use of it.

Both of them were confident that they were going to succeed. So, he was going to be confident, too.

Sunny didn't fully trust either of his former companions, not anymore. But he trusted their judgment.

...Just as that thought appeared in his mind, there was a subtle movement at the edges of his vision. Turning his head, Sunny stared into the darkness... and trembled.

"...It's here."

Out there in the distance, a massive shape was moving through the waves, attracted by the light of Changing Star's incandescent blade. The sea seethed and swirled around it, the black mass of water easily pushed away by the approaching creature.

Nephis gritted her teeth and somehow made her flames burn even brighter, forcing the darkness to retreat another dozen steps.

"Get ready!"

A few moments later, the furious sounds of a massive body moving through the dark water reached their ears. The creature was a true giant, easily towering above the waves even though it was walking on the bottom of the canyon.

...Well, no surprise.

Full of terror and awe, Sunny watched as the thing they were waiting for came closer. Soon, he could discern the general shape of it.

Two hills that rose above water were its shoulders. And right between them, where the head should have been...

There was nothing but emptiness.

There were seven headless statues on the Forgotten Shore, but only six marks on the map created by Nephis. Not because she had failed to learn of the seventh one...

But because the seventh statue never stayed in one place for too long.

And now, that stone colossus was walking through the flooded canyon, his shoulder scraping against one of its walls. The wide chest of the headless giant pushed the water away, creating whirlpools in his wake.

Raising one colossal arm, the statue easily destroyed the protruding remnants of the ancient bridge that got in its way. The debris rained into the black waves, disappearing into them without a trace.

This... this was their fast and safe — comparatively — method of traveling to the edges of the Forgotten Shore.

'Truly insane,' Sunny thought, stunned by the sheer scale of everything that was happening.

Come to think of it, it was really ironic. The next day after he had decided to return to some semblance of sanity, something this crazy was about to transpire.

It was as though the whole world was mocking him.

Shaking his head, Sunny turned to the cohort and yelled:

"He's coming!"

The black water was already to their knees. The members of the cohort tensed and prepared themselves for what was about to come.

They only had one chance to do this. Failure meant death.

A few moments later, the massive shape of the stone colossus entered the circle of light created by Nephis. Its shoulders rose above the waves, close enough to the now invisible shore of the flooded canyon for them to see every tiny crack on the surface of the weathered stone.

Now wasting any time, Changing Star ran forward and jumped. A moment later, the blade of her sword hit the surface of the statue and slid deep into it, as if melting the ancient stone. Using the sword as purchase, Nephis started to climb to the giant's shoulder.

The other members of the cohort were following closely behind her. Kai was carrying Cassie in his arms, flying to the top of the colossus with no problem at all. Caster seemed to simply disappear and appear a moment later on the giant's shoulder, standing side by side with Changing Star.

...Only Sunny was having trouble. With him not being very tall and the water level rising with each second, he found it hard to gain enough momentum for a proper jump.

'Damn... how irritating...'

However, before he could come up with a solution, Effie simply grabbed him by the collar... and tossed Sunny into the air.

'W—what?!'

For a few short moments, Sunny was flying. All he could hear was wind whistling in his ears.

Then, he landed on top of the giant statue, rolled, and barely prevented himself from falling back into the cold embrace of the dark sea. Before he could even stand up, the mighty huntress landed near him and grinned.

"Such a light..."

However, before she could finish the phrase, the stone colossus moved, making everyone stumble and fall.

Leaving the ruins of the bridge behind, he turned around and indifferently began walking away from it.

He was walking south.

Chapter 228: Crossing the Canyon

The stone colossus wandered the Forgotten Shore aimlessly for thousands of years. Cassie did not know what power had brought him to life, nor what he was searching for in the depths of the dark sea.

She had seen a vision of the headless giant passing the ruins of the ancient bridge on a certain day and then traveling south to the very edges of this desolate land. She also knew that the leader of the cohort that had conquered the Bright Castle pursued the seventh statue across the Labyrinth for a long time before leaving on his doomed journey.

His reasons for doing so were, presumably, unknown.

Sunny wasn't sure that the blind girl had told him the whole truth about the wandering colossus. In fact, he was certain that there was a deeper layer of secrets surrounding the seven ancient statues and their importance to the riddle of the Forgotten Shore.

However, he was in no hurry to hunt these secrets down. Sunny knew that all three of them — Nephis, Cassie, and himself — were bound together to this cursed place. The strings of fate were wrapped around them tightly, stretching far into the future, where the final revelations waited. He was going to learn the truth sooner or later.

Until then, Sunny was content knowing no more than he needed to know.

...The stone giant walked across the dark sea, cutting its surface with his wide chest. The six humans were gathered on the circular platform of his severed neck, pressing themselves against the swaying stone. The cold water was spraying into their faces and the furious winds were threatening to throw them off the moving statue into the deadly waves below.

Nephis had long extinguished her flames, so they were surrounded by absolute darkness. Sunny was the only one who could see what was happening around them, so his role was to serve as the eyes of the cohort.

Using the strength of the shadow to hold onto the slippery stones, he looked forward with a grim expression on his face.

Currently, there was only one thought on his mind.

Were they going to make it in time?

The colossus was swiftly approaching the other side of the canyon. Sunny could identify it by the remnants of the ancient bridge that were still above the turbulent black waves. However, the water level was rising much faster.

"Sunny?!"

Looking toward Effie, who called out his name, he lingered for a few moments and then yelled:

"Prepare yourself! We're going to be underwater for a couple of minutes, at least!"

A chorus of curses served as the answer.

Unseen by anyone, Sunny smiled darkly.

This was going to be his second time diving into the dark sea. Wasn't this how Gunlaug had begun his journey to the throne of the Dark City?

Maybe Sunny would be a king himself, one day.

"...Now!"

The black water rose higher and higher. The shoulders of the giant were already submerged in its lightless depths. The circular platform was going to be next.

They were so close to the shore...

As the stone colossus moved across the bottom of the canyon, the platform rose and fell. After another fall, it was finally lost beneath the waves.

The cold, salty water crashed into them and then swallowed the entire world. The members of the cohort desperately held onto the cracks in the stone, trying to prevent themselves from being washed away by the raging current.

No one would be able to save them if they were.

Sunny closed his eyes, knowing that he would not be able to see anything through the impenetrable darkness of the cursed sea. Instead, he relied on his Shadow Sense, hoping that it was going to help him feel if something approached them from the depths.

Now, all Sunny had to do was hold tight and hope that the headless giant would reach the shore of the canyon before he ran out of breath.

Thankfully, everyone present was strong and powerful. Their physical form was either at the pinnacle of human ability or slightly above it. Several minutes underwater were not going to kill them... most likely.

Placating himself with this thought, Sunny waited, and waited, and waited, struggling against the terrible current with all his strength. At some point, he thought that he sensed an unclear shape swim close to the walking statue, but then the sensation disappeared.

'Any second now... any second...'

But the relief he was so desperately waiting for was not coming for far longer than Sunny had expected. Soon, his lungs began to burn, and his muscles began to spasm.

'Damnation...'

If he was having trouble, then others must have been in far worse shape. After all, oxygen traveled through human bodies with blood, and their blood had not been altered and comprehensively enhanced by the forbidden legacy of the mysterious Weaver.

Just as he thought so, Sunny felt one of the six shadows slipping from the circular platform.

It was Kai...

'Crap!'

Fortunately, before the colossus plunged into the dark depths, the charming archer had been worried about Cassie and tied himself to her with the help of the golden rope. Surprisingly, the blind girl turned out to be more resilient than him in the end. Now, she was holding both of their weights, desperately grabbing onto a narrow crack in the ancient stone.

Kai's unconscious body was floating a few meters behind her. He was safe, for now.

But how long would Cassie herself be able to hold on?

...When Sunny felt his mind weakening, his body was suddenly slammed into the platform with tremendous force.

The stone giant was climbing out of the canyon. His massive hands grabbed onto the edge of it, and with one devastating pull, the colossus threw himself upward.

'Ugh... curse it!'

Sunny felt as though he was aboard the worst amusement ride in human history. His bones groaned, being pressed down upon by an invisible weight.

A few moments of this torture, and they were above water once again.

Desperately grasping for air, Sunny inhaled several times and then weakly looked at the unconscious form of Kai. Crawling toward the archer, he grabbed him and dragged the body back to the rest of the group.

Entrusting him to Cassie, Sunny looked down at the dark water below... and suddenly growled in a low voice.

Turning her head, Nephis asked with a deep frown on her pale face:

"Sunny? What is it?"

Looking at the torso of the giant statue, he gritted his teeth and lingered for a few moments before answering.

Then, in a voice that was dreadfully grim, Sunny said:

"...We have a passenger."

Chapter 229: The Passenger | Shadow Slave

The colossus rose from beneath the turbulent waves, rivers of black water streaming down his stone body. Now that the walking statue had climbed out of the canyon, the cursed sea was barely up to its abdomen... for the moment.

Once the dark waters reached higher, the giant would be submerged in them up to his shoulders once again.

Sunny had to get rid of the unwelcomed passenger until then.

Far below, flattened against the chest of the colossus, a strange creature had attached itself to the ancient statue. It looked like a cross between a translucent jellyfish and an eel. However, Sunny could see a deformed skeleton of a giant humanoid being trapped within the transparent flesh of the repulsive abomination.

P AN DA-NO VEL. COM He shivered.

Compared to the stone giant, the eel looked rather small... however, this was just an illusion. Really, the creature was as large as a train. Its jaws were full of sharp fangs and wide enough to swallow a human whole.

'Curses.'

If there was one good thing about the situation, it was that the eel did not seem to be a Corrupted Nightmare Creature, but merely a Fallen one. Perhaps it survived in the cursed sea by attaching itself to the true terrors of the depths and feeding off the remains of their prey.

As soon as Nephis spoke, Sunny noticed long feelers of the creature tremble and move, as though reacting to the sudden sound. The eel turned its head slightly in their direction.

When he answered, the feelers rippled once again, and the monstrosity turned its head once more, this time staring directly at Sunny.

'Crap...'

A moment later, translucent tentacles appeared from beneath the abomination's body and shot up, finding cracks in the weathered stone and pulling it toward the neck of the colossus.

...Where the cohort was.

Changing Star must have felt something, because tiny white sparks suddenly ignited in the depths of her eyes.

Sunny put a hand on her shoulder and shook his head.

"Don't."

Stone giant or not, lighting a beacon in the middle of the cursed sea was not the best of ideas. Now that it had escaped the confines of the canyon, the real horrors were out and about. Just like the cohort had discussed before, light was their last resort, something they would summon only if the moment came where there was no other choice but for all of them to fight.

And whether Sunny liked it or not, that moment was not upon them yet.

With a reluctant scowl, he turned away and said:

"I'll handle it."

...The giant eel was his problem to solve.

'Yeah, that's great and all. But how the Spell am I supposed to get rid of this thing?'

Looking down, Sunny calculated that he had a dozen or so seconds left before it was time to act. The repulsive abomination was slowly crawling toward them, scaling the torso of the giant statue at a disturbingly steady pace.

'Think, think...'

Several seconds later, Sunny approached Effie and kneeled by her side. Taking the huntress by the hand, he put something into her palm and said:

"Do you feel the colossus moving up and down? That's his steps. I need you to start counting them. If I'm not back after thirty steps, throw the thing I gave you in that direction as hard as you can. Alright?"

Effie gave him a nod. Her usual humor was gone, replaced by grim determination.

"Good. Well... wish me luck."

The huntress lingered for a moment and then said:

"Good luck."

When he was ready to walk away, she suddenly gripped his arm.

Sunny stopped and raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

Effie hesitated before speaking.

"Listen, Sunny... if... if you die... I can have your soul shards, right?"

He stared at her for a second, his face twitching.

'This wench!'

"Absolutely not! If I die, all my shards are to be thrown into the sea. No one is to get anything, understand?"

With that, he left the cohort behind and walked to the edge of the swaying stone platform.

'...Here goes nothing.'

Jumping down, Sunny slid to the giant's shoulder and caught himself from falling all the way into the raging waves by grabbing onto a crack in the stone. To his right, the shoulder was slowly moving as the colossus swung his hand. To his left, a curved path of stone led all the way across the chest of the statue to its other shoulder.

This curving path was, in fact, the collar of the giant's tunic, carved masterfully from stone by the unknown sculptor. Stepping on it, Sunny struggled to keep his balance on the swaying slippery surface and hurried forward.

Soon, he was directly above the climbing eel. The abomination was already close, allowing Sunny to discern every repugnant detail of its translucent, giant body.

'What the hell. Why does everything have to be so disgusting?'

A moment later, he sighed.

'Let's... try this.'

Summoning the Prowling Thorn, Sunny gritted his teeth and cut his forearm, smearing some blood on the blade of the kunai. Then, he used all the strength he had in his body to hurl the dagger down.

The Prowling Thorn spun in the air and hit the giant eel right in the place where its eye should have been. Sunny did not notice any visual organs on the creature's body, but on the deformed humanoid skull hiding beneath the flesh, that's where the eye socket was.

The kunai wedged itself deep into the monster's head, causing a small fountain of crimson blood to erupt upward. Of course, such a tiny wound was nothing for a creature of this size. For a moment, everything became silent.

...Then, hundreds of slender tentacles suddenly exploded from the eel's flesh and shoot in Sunny's direction in a chaotic, slithering mass of translucent flesh.

'Damn it!'

Forced to dismiss the Prowling Thorn to avoid being thrown off the ledge, Sunny lunged forward. A moment later, the tentacles reached his previous position and crashed into the stone, sending shards flying into the air.

Sunny kept running, knowing that the tentacles were just a second away from piercing him. The sounds of breaking stone were thundering just behind his back, getting closer and closer with each moment. The Prowling Thorn appeared in his hand one again.

Reaching the end of the path and with nowhere left to run, Sunny cursed... and jumped straight into the darkness.

Chapter 205: Journey To The South

Sadly, the cohort did not get a lot of time to rest. Despite the fact that it wasn't even noon yet, they had a lot of ground to cover before sunset.

The plan they had made at the start of the day was to leave the Dark City from the south by climbing the wall near the grandiose Main Gates and then travel through the Labyrinth to the next safe height, which was about ten kilometers away.

However, due to the fact that they had ended up in the catacombs instead and had to escape through the chamber belonging to the Lord of the Dead, the party was now to the east of the ruins, near the beautiful statue of the faceless woman. Not only did they have to circle around the city now, but there was also less time to reach safety before the flood of darkness devoured the Forgotten Shore once again.

Standing up in a chorus of disappointed groans, the cohort assumed the marching formation and set out south. Walking through the mud of the colossal crater was not easy, but for the time being, they had no other choice... unless they wanted to scale the monumental stone wall and return to the Dark City, of course.

Luckily, with both Sunny's shadow and Kai scouting the way ahead, they didn't have to worry about being ambushed by monsters. So, for the time being, the only thing the party had to struggle with was moving their feet through the wet dirt.

The monotonous silence was broken only by laborious breathing and slurping of mud.

...A while later, the impregnable and seemingly endless grey wall that loomed some distance away and above them slowly twisted, drifting away from the edge of the crater.

They were finally leaving the cursed ruins behind.

Turning around, Sunny looked back and studied the sight of the city that had been his whole world for these past four... almost five months.

Far away, the floor of the gargantuan crater sharply rose, forming a tall slope. On it stood the unassailable wall of polished grey stone, firm and unyielding despite the thousands of years that had passed since the demise of its creators.

P AND A NOVEL From where he stood, Sunny could see the flood of crimson coral swelling at its base, sharp blades powerlessly scraping against the cold stone in hopeless attempts to find purchase. It looked as though the city was being besieged by the land itself.

'If it knew what awaits inside, the Labyrinth would be trying to escape as far as possible from that damned place instead.'

With a sigh, Sunny looked up and noticed a lone human figure standing on the wall, watching them disappear into the distance. That figure was crooked and dark, emanating a cold feeling of foreboding.

A few moments later, it turned away and disappeared from view.

Harus had chosen to return to the Bright Castle.

Trying not to shiver, Sunny lingered for a few seconds, and then hurried to catch up with the group.

They were safe from him, at least...

'For now.'

***panda novel

Because the crater was too big, the bent of its edge was almost imperceptible. Only by looking far into the distance could one say that it was actually curved. Because of this, the cohort could have continued traveling through the crater for a long time without having to move farther away from the goal of today's journey, which lay to the southwest of their current position.

However, they had to leave the crater and return to the Labyrinth sooner or later — not only to escape the black water, but also because there was nothing to hide behind on this vast muddy plain. If any flying Nightmare Creature decided to attack them from above, the cohort would have no defense against it.

The Labyrinth, while hiding its own fair share of terrifying threats, at least offered some measure of protection.

That's why, at some point, Nephis led the party to the sharp slope of the crater, and the six of them climbed out of it. With the help of Kai and the trusty golden rope, the task wasn't hard at all.

For some time after that, they walked on the ridge separating the crater from the Labyrinth proper, but then, finally, had to turn west and enter the maze of crimson coral.

Sunny couldn't help but sigh once the familiar coral walls surrounded him once again. He didn't miss the first months of his infernal voyage into the Dream Realm at all.

Well... maybe a little. But not because of the damn Labyrinth itself, that's for sure.

The crimson forest was simultaneously the same and vastly different from the region of it that he had traveled through before.

The coral maze itself was pretty much identical to how it had been east of the gargantuan crater. However, the creatures populating it in these parts were vastly different.

There were no members of the carapace legion around, at least not anywhere Sunny could see. Instead, the dominant tribe of Nightmare Creatures in this region seemed to consist of nasty, spider-like critters that had a habit of decorating the walls and passages of the Labyrinth with endless amounts of grey, incredibly sticky cobwebs.

What's worse, their web seemed to be made not out of spider silk, but out of thin metal wires that were as tough as iron and could cut the victim into little pieces if it thrashed too much after getting caught.

Needless to say, getting yourself stuck in these webs was tantamount to a death sentence.

The deeper into the Labyrinth they went, the more of these cobwebs surrounded them. It came to the point where they had to use Cassie's flying rapier to clear the path ahead every few minutes, slowing down the speed of the cohort to a crawl.

During one of these stops, Sunny rubbed his face and thought:

'I just hope that nothing attacks us while we wait.'

Turning to him, the shadow glared for a few moments and then tiredly shook its head. It then placed one palm across its face and looked down, as if defeated.

'...What? What did I say?'

A moment later, several massive spider-like creatures jumped out of the cracks in the coral and attacked them.

Chapter 206: Triumph | Shadow Slave

The spiders were about the size of a human, incredibly fast, and had plates of something that resembled iron covering parts of their repulsive bodies. They looked like armored battle machines created for the sole purpose of slaughtering living things.

They also looked strangely familiar. With a little effort, Sunny realized that these abominations looked a lot like lesser, much smaller versions of the giant Fallen Beasts that had destroyed the original Stone Saint and her kin.

It's just that their size and armor weren't nearly as formidable.

If so...

'I have bad news for you, fools.'

As soon as the spiders attacked, the members of the cohort reacted with the deadly calmness of experienced Dark City hunters. Weapons flashed in the air, severing limbs and piercing through iron as though it was paper. Effie straight up flattened one of the creatures with a devastating strike of her battered shield. The poor beast didn't even have time to understand what a huge mistake it had made.

The others were no less efficient. Sunny himself threw the Prowling Thorn and pulled on the invisible string as soon as it sunk into the flesh of one of the spiders, bringing its jump to an abrupt end and sending it crashing to the ground. Before the beast could stand up, Quiet Dancer streaked through the air and pierced its head clean through.

Just a few short seconds after the spiders had tried to ambush the group of humans, the battle was over. Three dead Nightmare Creatures were sprawled in the mud, while the fourth one ended up pinned to a coral wall with several arrows.

They could have even shaved a second or two if it weren't for the need to look out for the spiderwebs.

Sunny shook his head.

'Disappointing.'

Wait.. why was he disappointed? Great! This was great! Not every victory had to almost cost him his life.

If there was one thing to feel disappointed about, it was that this one was so swift that he had not even gotten the chance to finish any of the enemies himself, thus not receiving any rewards from the Spell. But even then, he would be glad to only fight easy battles like this in the future.

Nephis cleaned the blade of her sword with a piece of cloth, listened to the silence for a few moments to make sure that nothing else was going to attack them, and then gave the cohort a go-ahead to start dressing the monsters down.

Soon, soul shards, strips of meat and other useful parts were cut, cleaned, and put into Effie's enchanted bag. Everything was done with efficient speed and professionalism that could only come from a lot of experience.

Sunny could only shake his head again.

They were able to dispose of the iron spiders with such ease because of two reasons. First, as far as Nightmare Creatures went, these ones were not on the same level as, for example, carapace scavengers. They had a slight advantage in speed, but were not nearly as strong, agile, and ridiculously tough.

If Sunny could guess, he would say that the iron spiders relied heavily on their webs and battlefield advantage to defeat the prey. Because the cohort had destroyed the webs in advance, their main advantage was gone.

The second reason was the cohort itself. They were some of the deadliest humans on the Forgotten Shore. Sunny was sure that at least four of them could kill a Pathfinder of the Host in single combat... if not one of the lieutenants themselves.

They were the best and the brightest the outer settlement could offer, after all. Effie had been right when she said that there had never been such a powerful cohort outside the walls of the Bright Castle before.

All in all, the six of them were more than equipped to handle just three awakened beasts. The Labyrinth was going to really try harder if it wished to see them dead.

Sunny chuckled.

"Just" three awakened beasts... yeah. How crazy did this sound?
panda novel

And yet, it was true.

Finishing up with the dead spiders, the cohort indifferently left their eviscerated bodies behind and continued on their way.

After several more minor skirmishes with the iron spiders, they had finally reached their destination. Not too far away from them, colored pink by the evening sun, a magnificent arch of white marble rose high above the sea of crimson coral.

The giant structure was clearly created by the same people who had built the Bright Castle, and made from the same stone. It looked like a much larger sibling of the pristine arch that guarded the entrance to the white road which climbed all the way to the outer settlement.

Only this one was much more weathered, bleak, and damaged. Signs of corrosion and deep cracks covered its surface, with one of its sides being partially collapsed.

Sunny studied the arch and looked at Nephis:

"This is our stop for the night?"

She gave him a simple nod and said after a short pause:

"We need to pick up our pace. The night is close, and we might have to fight to clear the top of it."

Sunny sighed. Fighting again... when would they finally be able to rest? It had been such a long day.

However, he kept his mouth shut. Changing Star was the most tired out of all of them... due to healing all their wounds, no less. And he didn't see her complaining.

So it wasn't his place.

P AND A N OVEL To his left, Effie suddenly cursed and groaned:

"More fighting? Come on! When are we finally going to eat?"

Sunny blinked.

'Well... that works, too, I guess.'

Staring at the huntress, Nephis shook her head and silently walked forward.

Soon, they reached the giant arch. Kai summoned his bow and flew up, only to return a few minutes later and report that no terrible monster was nesting on top of the ancient structure.

With sighs of relief, the members of the cohort climbed the golden rope one after another and were soon standing far above the Labyrinth, silently watching as the flood of black water drowned it in the lightless depths.

As the sun disappeared beyond the horizon, they were left on a rectangular island made out of white marble. All around it, there was nothing but the undulating waves of the dark sea.

Sunny was once again surrounded from all sides by nothing but darkness and black water. He did not like the feeling.

Chapter 207: Beach Episode | Shadow Slave

The night passed with no incidents. In the morning, Sunny was woken up by the sound of the surging waves and opened his eyes to see the sun slowly rising from beyond the horizon.

Rubbing his face, he sat up and looked around, noticing that most of the cohort was still asleep. Only Kai, who had been the last one to stand watch, was awake, sitting on the edge of the arch and admiring the dawn with a dreamy look on his face.

Sunny wanted to call out to him and warn the charming archer not to sit this close to the edge, but then remembered that Kai could fly.

'Yeah. Like I would forget it again!'

Using the opportunity, he dove into the Soul Sea and summoned Stone Saint from the depths of the Shadow Core, where she was sleeping in the embrace of nurturing black flames. Just like before, the Shadow did not appear from a sphere of light like an Echo would, but stepped out from a whirlpool of dark fire.

Then, she stood motionlessly in front of Sunny like an actual statue, seemingly indifferent both to his presence and the wounds covering her body.

P AND A N OVEL Sunny walked around the Stone Saint, studying the extent of damage done to her by the undead horde. The armor of the taciturn knight was battered and broken, pierced in several places by the claws of the countless skeletons she had fought. The ruby dust wasn't flowing from the breaches anymore, but he could see deep gashes on her smooth, grey skin.

'Bastards.'

Who dares to hurt his Shadow?

Shaking his head, Sunny dismissed the Saint, sending her back into the restorative darkness of the Shadow Core.

The damage, while extensive, was not really threatening to her existence. In a couple of days, his pet monster should fully recover.

In fact, she already looked better than she had yesterday.

Leaving the Soul Sea, Sunny inhaled the fresh air, lingered for a few moments, and then turned to Kai:

"Hey, Night. Are you stupid? Don't sit this close to the edge!"

The charming archer looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

"I can fly, remember? If I fall..."

Sunny scoffed.

"I'm not worried about you falling into the cursed sea. I am worried about something dragging you off into it. That'd be terrible, right?"

Quite happy with himself, he grinned and turned away.

'What a nice way to start the day...'

Because everyone needed some time to rest and recuperate, they decided to spend a day on the marble arch and continue their journey tomorrow.

As the result, Sunny was currently staring at the sight that wasn't really funny, but filled him with mirth nevertheless.

Back in the real world, when he had time to consume some entertainment, Sunny had noticed a certain popular trope. In most dramas, webtoons, and cartoons aimed at young boys and teenagers, the heroes would inevitably end up spending a day at the beach during their adventures.

He didn't quite know why such a trope existed, but suspected that it was just an excuse to show the female characters in nothing but revealing swimsuits.

Not that he had anything against it...

In any case, Sunny had never imagined that he was going to end up in such an episode himself one day. panda novel

'This is... simply hilarious!'

Barely holding himself from laughing out loud, Sunny glanced at his companions.

Because everyone's armor and weapons were damaged during the battle in the catacombs, they had to keep these Memories inside the Soul Sea for a bit of time to allow them to restore themselves — just like Stone Saint was currently doing in the depths of his Shadow Core.

As the result, all of them — including Sunny himself — were currently wearing nothing except for some loincloths and, in the case of the girls, makeshift brassieres.

Provided, these crude undergarments weren't really swimsuits, and the marble arch could barely be considered a beach even at night... but still, the situation was funnily similar.

They were all half-naked and relaxing in the middle of a something that someone could call an adventure, so it was close enough.

'Ha!'

He was in a rather good mood.

Everyone was busy doing their thing. There was a fire in the middle of the arch, with roasting meat filling the air with an appetizing aroma. Effie was tending to it.

The tan and lean body of the muscular huntress looked like it was cut from stone, as if she was a sculpture of an ancient goddess come to life. Sunny

tried to count her abs and got distracted halfway through by... uh... not so stonelike parts of her robust figure.

After a couple of seconds of thoughtless bliss, Sunny had to hurriedly look away. The last thing he wanted was...

'Pure thoughts!'

Nephis was helping Effie with the breakfast. Next to the vigorous huntress, her figure seemed especially slender and lithe. However, she was also extremely athletic in appearance. Her ivory skin was pleasantly contrasted against the olive skin of their boisterous pathfinder.

'What a sight to behold...'

Uh... from a purely aesthetic standpoint, of course.

Seeing Changing Star like that reminded Sunny of the early days of their stay in the Dream Realm. Things had been much simpler back then.

Suddenly wistful, he looked away and checked what Cassie was doing. The blind girl was resting near the fire, wrapped in her beautiful cloak. With her delicate features and small stature, she looked extremely lovely.

And then... there were Kai and Caster.

Sunny sighed and looked down at his own scrawny body. Honestly, after all these months spent hunting monsters, eating meat and absorbing shadow fragments, he looked much better than he used to. In fact, by human standards, he was nothing short of... well, above average.

Even as far as Awakened went, he could probably compete with some in the looks department.

...But those two specimens were simply on another level!

Kai was tall and shaped like a young god, with lean muscles rolling under his flawless skin and a svelte figure that begged to be sculpted into a marble masterpiece. Sunny could swear that even sunlight was attracted to him,

illuminating the charming archer in just a way to make him look as gorgeous as possible.

Currently, Kai was tending to his arrows, somehow managing to make even that simple task look glamorous.

Caster was much the same, with a perfect body and broad shoulders that simply screamed of power, appeal and potency. With a darker skin to match his gallant and manly image, he was basically the epitome of masculinity. This was contrasted by a handsome, but gentle face and humorous green eyes, creating a rather tempting visage.

Sunny grimaced and turned away.

'You know what? To hell with this beach day nonsense! Let's do something productive...'

Chapter 208: Something Productive | Shadow Slave

Walking over to Kai, Sunny cleared his throat and forced himself to not cover his eyes. The damn archer was just too dazzling. Him being shirtless in crowded places should have honestly been categorized as a public hazard back in the real world.

If not, there was a gross oversight.

'I wonder how he was made. Probably in a secret government laboratory or a magic cauldron of some sort. I mean, there's no way that this dude is the same species as me... right?'

After a few seconds of Sunny blankly staring at him, Kai smiled politely:

"Uh, Sunny? Did you want something?"

Sunny flinched and covered his eyes.

"Ah! Don't smile at me!"

Kai blinked.

"...Alright."

Breathing heavily, Sunny glared at him and slowly lowered his hand.

"That's better. And yes, I did want something."

Kai suddenly livened up and pointed at his chest.

"What is that? An accessory?"

'What is he...'

Lowering his gaze, Sunny noticed the mysterious key hanging on a thread tied around his neck.

He didn't really want to show it to anyone, but with the Puppeteer's Shroud restoring itself in the Soul Sea, there were not a lot of places where he could hide it.

None that he was willing to use, at least...

Plus, no one else was supposed to be able to see the light of divinity, so to them, it just looked like a small iron key.

Sunny frowned.

"It's not an accessory. It's a key. "

Kai hesitated.

"Oh. What does it open?"

Sunny shrugged.

"How should I know?"

The charming archer seemed a little confused.

"But if it's not an accessory and it doesn't open anything, why are you carrying it around?"

His questions were starting to get tiresome. Sunny sighed.

"To open something, of course!"

Kai scratched his nose.

"But you just said that you don't know what it opens."

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"It's a damn key, right?! So it has to open something! I just carry it around in case I find something that can be opened by that damned key! What's so hard to understand?!"

The beautiful archer gave him a strange look.

"Oh... I see. That definitely makes sense."

'Curses! That's not how I planned to approach him...'

Sunny instantly changed his expression and looked at Kai with a wide smile.

...The sudden shift looked sort of creepy.

"Uh, what I wanted to say, Night, my dear friend... we are friends, right? Anyway, what I wanted to say was that I hope that this answer satisfies your curiosity. That's something a friend would say... right?"

The charming young man gave him a dubious look.

"I guess?"

Sunny made his smile wider, feeling his face hurt a little. panda novel

"Great! So we are friends. Well, some might say that it's your lucky day, buddy. Because today — and only today, probably! — Sunny's Gorgeous Emporium offers customers an exclusive friendship deal. Just for friends of the establishment. Aren't you lucky?"

Kai suddenly coughed.

"...Wasn't it Sunny's Brilliant Emporium last time?"

Sunny blinked.

"Was it? Well, doesn't matter. The deal still stands. Are you interested or not?"

The archer lingered for a few moments, and then cautiously said:

"But Sunny... you still haven't told me what exactly that deal entails. Is it a deal for customers you consider friends or are you trying to sell me your "friendship"? Or wait, do you want to buy mine? Or both? Ah, I'm confused."

As if waiting for that response, Sunny nodded energetically.

"Yes! I'm glad that you asked. In fact, I have an incredible item that I want to sell. It's so incredible that I am even reluctant to part with it. But since you are my friend, I am willing to give it away. Practically for free. Full friendship discount, just for you. No need to thank me, really."

Attracted by the noise, the others left what they were doing and were now staring at the two of them. Effie got distracted from preparing meat and was now observing the circus with an expectant grin.

Realizing that he is now the center of attention, Kai sighed.

"Alright, I'll bite. What is that incredible item you want to sell me?"

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, and then suddenly stopped smiling.

"Oh, just something I had gathering dust in my Soul Sea. It's a Memory that can serve as an endless supply of arrows. As long as you don't miss."

The beautiful archer's eyes suddenly lit up. He glanced at his quiver and said:

"Wait... really? You really have such a Memory?"

P AND A N OVEL After thinking about it for a long time, Sunny had decided to give the Blood Arrow to Kai. Having the archer of their cohort armed with it would make a lot of things easier during this journey.

He could potentially earn himself a bow in the future and learn how to use it, but it wouldn't be anytime soon. Plus, with how dangerous the

enchantments of the Blood Arrow were, nothing short of excellence would fly. And excellence took a lot of time to achieve, time that he didn't have. So, giving it to a skilled archer like Kai was a better decision.

Their recent encounters with the iron spiders only made Sunny more certain that this was the right thing to do.

But he wasn't going to give it away for free.

"Yes, I do have such a Memory."

Then, he casually added:

"Oh, did I forget to say? It's can provide an endless supply of arrows, and also all those arrows will be of the Ascended rank."

A grave silence settled over the marble arch.

"You... you're in possession of an Ascended Memory?"

That question was asked by Caster. Kai didn't have to ask, because he already knew that Sunny was telling the truth.

His eyes slightly widened.

On the Forgotten Shore, Ascended Memories were exceedingly rare — for an obvious reason. Sleepers could only get one by defeating a Fallen Nightmare Creature, and there weren't a lot of people capable of such a feat. Added to that was the fact that not every kill provided a Memory. In fact, most didn't.

To receive one was the dream of every inhabitant of the Dark City.

Sunny shrugged.

"Oh, I have a couple. Why?"

...The other being the onyx armor. Which was broken and useless. But they didn't need to know that, honestly.

He grinned.

"Only the best wares in the Sunny's Astonishing Emporium! Wait, uh... was it astonishing? Ah, who cares. You get the sentiment."

Caster shook his head.

"How did you get an Ascended Memory? You?"

The grin froze on Sunny's face. When he spoke a few moments later, all humor was gone from his voice, replaced by coldness.

"Well, if you have to know. I got it by killing a Fallen Beast. Before you ask... this time, I didn't have to shake my finger or spit. I just looked at it, and it died."

Then, he turned his head and looked straight at Caster:

"I am very proficient in killing things, you know."

Chapter 209: Fireside Banter | Shadow Slave

In the end, Kai agreed to his deal. In exchange for the Blood Arrow, he gave Sunny three Memories: the two weaker arrows he had and a small charm capable of producing fire.

Sunny fed all three to the Stone Saint, bringing her amount of shadow fragments to thirty-one. That was four more than she had in the past, which meant that he received the same amount of fragments that he would have gotten by feeding her the Blood Arrow itself.

He didn't really gain anything, but also didn't lose anything. Kai was the one who really profited from their exchange.

So Sunny didn't lie when he said that it was an incredible deal.

After breakfast, which transpired in somewhat awkward silence, Sunny sprawled on the ground and smiled happily.

"You know, guys. These past few weeks made me realize something. Actually, it was all thanks to Kai, who introduced me... introduced me... uh... to Stev."

Effie stretched, making Sunny stutter and lose the train of thought for a second, then smiled with satisfaction and glanced at him.

"Really? And what is that?"

Sunny hesitated for a few moments and said:

"When I was a little kid, I loved reading webtoons about the Awakened. You know, the ones where they always explore ancient ruins, battle Nightmare Creatures, and grow more powerful with each victory."

He chuckled.

"The hero and his cohort decide on an adventure, vanquish evil, gain mighty Memories, then return to the real world and sell their spoils at the adventurer shop. They spend their money to upgrade their equipment, and immediately set out on a more epic and dangerous adventure."

P AND A NOVEL Cassie smiled.

"I loved to read those too."

Sunny glanced at her and sighed.

"Yeah. But when I got older, I couldn't help but think — what are they thinking about? Exploring ancient ruins is not a wise thing to do. In fact, only crazy people would do it. No matter how good you are, sooner or later, you will meet something more terrifying than any human can handle and die. If this was real life, why would all those adventurers go into the ruins over and over again?"

The blind girl tilted her head and opened her mouth, but then closed it again.

Sunny smiled.

"But then it hit me! They were not doing it to vanquish evil. They were doing it to collect a wide variety of powerful Memories. You see, the real dream is not to be the hero, one of their companions, or even the love interest. The real dream is to be the owner of the shop where the hero sells his trophies and buys new equipment! That way you can live a pretty life without risking your neck. That's the real goal."

He crossed his arms and added:

"After a few short years of adventuring around the Dream Realm and collecting Memories, you can retire, open a shop, and leave comfortably for the rest of your life. All you need is to sell a Memory once every couple of years. Maybe make some money off the younger, less fortunate adventurers, too."

Kai laughed and looked at Sunny with curiosity.

"So... say that we somehow manage to return to the real world and become true Awakened. Is this what you're going to do?"

Sunny thought about it for a few moments and shrugged.

"I don't know. I don't really have a lot to do in the real world, apart from compiling all the things I've learned about the Forgotten Shore into a report and giving it to a teacher who was kind to me back at the Academy. So... maybe? I don't have enough Memories yet to open a real store, though."

He glanced at the charming archer and smiled.

"What about you? What is the thing you really want to do if you return to the real world?"

Kai suddenly turned away with a look of embarrassment on his face.

"Oh... I don't know. I haven't really thought about it."

But after several seconds, he suddenly said in a shy voice:

"...Avatar Singer."

Sunny blinked.panda novel

"A what?"

The archer hesitated for a while, and then explained:

"Avatar Singer is a music competition show. Popular singers compete with each other, but the twist is that they are all using the stock VR avatars to perform. So the judges can only evaluate their voices and skill. They only learn the singer's identity after."

Effie giggled.

"Why would you want to hide your pretty face, Night? It's your best feature!"

Kai was silent for a few moments, and then smiled gently.

"I just... I just think that it would be nice, to be judged based on my skill and talent alone, with nothing else getting in the way. Also, that would be such a great way to announce my return to the fans! Just imagine... they would be so excited! That would be a perfect media storm."

Sunny shook his head. It seemed that Kai was really a celebrity. Talking about things like fan reactions and media storms with a straight face... did he even hear himself?

But it was a nice dream, at least. Better than his own stupid desires, by far.

Turning to Effie, he asked:

"What about you? What would you do in the real world?"

The huntress grinned.

"I don't even have to think about it. I would go eat chicken wings... the real ones. And then start preparing myself for the Second Nightmare. Pretty simple."

Everybody grew silent. After a while, Cassie said:

"Are you sure that you want to challenge another Nightmare?"

Effie shrugged.

"I have my reasons. So yes. For me, that is the only choice."

The blind girl was quiet for a bit, and then said:

"I would go and spend time with my mom and dad. That's the thing I want to do most in the real world."

Caster glanced at her and courtly nodded.

"I agree with Cassie. Family is the most important. When I come back, I will greet my father and look him in the eyes with pride, knowing that I did not let our clan down. Then, I will try to do everything in my power to grow as fast as possible, to relieve him of his worries and propel our bloodline to new heights."

'How very... Legacy-like of him.'

Finally turning to Nephis, Sunny looked at her with a subtly dark expression and asked:

"How about you, Neph? What are you going to do when you return to the real world?"

Changing Star was silent for a while, looking into the distance with a calm expression.

Then, she sighed and answered in a quiet voice:

"I would go visit my mom, too."

Everyone grew silent. Sunny blinked, a little confused.

"Wait. Your mom? I thought she was dead."

Nephis lingered for a bit, and then turned her face away.

"She is. Technically."

Chapter 210: Shadow Of The Past

'Technically dead? What does she mean?'

Sunny glanced at the others and saw that they, too, were confused. Everyone except for Caster, that is, who seemed like he knew something.

A few moments passed in tense silence, which was broken by Changing Star's sigh. Looking at them, she said evenly:

"My mother is one of the Hollow. She became Hollow while pregnant with me, actually. So I never really met her. Just her... body."

Nephis grew silent. After a while, a strange smile appeared on her face.

"It's funny, really. When my grandmother was still alive, I made a point of treating that body as nothing but a corpse. But once she passed away and we were the only ones left... well. I found myself getting a bit confused."

P AND A N OVEL Nephis shrugged and turned away once again.

"Anyway, before leaving for the First Nightmare, I used what little money there was left of our estate to buy her a VIP spot in a specialized Hollow care facility. They are treating her really well. But still... I don't like the idea of her being alone there. So when I return, that's what I'm going to do. Visit her."

No one said anything, heavily affected by her words.

Sunny stared at Changing Star, trying to imagine what it must have felt like, growing up in the company of your parent's soulless shell. With death staring at you through those empty eyes every day, always looming over you like a dark shadow... both of your past and your future.

Maybe that was a part of the reason why Neph hated the Spell so much.

Sensing the heaviness in the air, Changing Star glanced at them and smiled darkly.

"What? Is this your first time meeting a hollowborn? Well, I can't blame you. Creatures of my breed are pretty rare. In fact, even I have never met another one."

Then, she sighed and stretched her legs, moving them closer to the fire.

"So yeah, that and dye my hair. These are the things I would do in the real world first."

Sunny blinked.

"...Dye your hair?"

Nephis nodded.

'How is that a priority?'

Feeling that he was missing something, Sunny scratched his head and asked:

"Why?"

She glanced at him in surprise.

"What do you mean, why? I'm not used to it, and it's weird. Do I need another reason?"

He stared at her with a perplexed expression. Noticing it, Changing Star frowned and asked with a tiny hint of amusement in her voice.

"Sunny... did you, perhaps, think that this is my natural hair color?"

He was silent for a while, then opened his mouth and closed it again.

"...It's not?"

Nephis looked at him for a while with a strange expression, and then suddenly exploded with laughter.

Her laugh was melodic, pure, and very pleasant to the ear. With regret, Sunny realized that he had never heard it before.

He wished that their lives were different, so that people could hear Nephis laugh more often. But they weren't, and would probably never be.

After a while, she glanced at him and smiled.

"Sunny, it's silver, for Spell's sake. Who has natural silver hair?"

Luckily, at that point, Kai suddenly came to his rescue:

"Actually, I thought that it's natural too. Ah... it suits you very well, Lady Nephis."

Changing Star turned to him with an expression of utter surprise. Then, she glanced at Effie with a silent question.

The huntress nodded.panda novel

"Yeah, me too. I mean... who knows what you Legacies are even made of?"

Nephis blinked a couple of times, then shook her head in bewilderment.

"Well... no, it's not natural. It became like that after my First Nightmare."

Kai leaned forward with curiosity:

"Really? What color was your hair before?"

She shrugged.

"Black. A normal human color."

The charming archer stared at her, and then smiled:

"That would suit you very well too, Lady Nephis. Ah, I can just see it."

However, Sunny couldn't. The idea of Changing Star without her arresting, eye-catching silver hair simply could not fit into his head. Let alone the fact that she was a brunette! How was this even possible?

'That would look so wrong! Right?'

Well... as it turned out, life was full of surprises.

Today, he learned not one, but two entirely new things about the person he had thought he knew the best in the world.

Who would have guessed that this would happen?

'...There might be something else except for skimpy swimsuits to these beach episodes, huh?'

After that, they spent some time resting and lazily conversing with each other. However, pretty soon, people started to get restless from boredom.

To combat it somehow, Sunny suggested the idea of playing a sports game.

...His motives were not at all dictated by a secret desire to see a bunch of absolutely gorgeous young people jump around and wrestle with each while very lightly dressed. Nope, not one bit.

However, things didn't go as he had envisioned them. Pretty soon, Sunny found himself cursing as he was desperately pulling on the golden rope in a furious match of tug of war.

...Well, it was supposed to be furious. But what was actually transpiring was Effie casually holding the rope with one hand while the four of them — Sunny, Cassie, Kai and Caster — were trying to move her from the spot with no visible results whatsoever. After a while, the huntress simply pulled on the rope and sent their entire team to the ground.

'That's... that's cheating!'

With a satisfied grin, Effie walked over and towered above him, her arms akimbo. Looking down directly at Sunny, she smirked.

"Weak. When did you lose your spirit, shorty?"

Then, she winked and said in a mischievous tone:

"Back at the cathedral, you were able to perform better. Not to mention last longer..."

Sunny grew bright red and gritted his teeth:

"Shut up! People will misunderstand!"

The huntress looked at him with a shocked expression.

"Mis—misunderstand? What are you... oh!"

Then, she pretended to be horrified and covered her mouth with one hand.

"You... what kind of a degenerate are you?! Training! I meant while you were training!"

While Sunny was staring at her in utter disbelief, his mouth wide open, Effie snorted, then turned away and exploded with laughter. Shaking her head, the boisterous huntress giggled one last time and walked away.

'...No more sports games! Ever! That wretched troublemaker will win them all, anyway!'

He needed to teach himself how to come up with better ideas...

Chapter 211: Game Of Lies

With a bit of disappointment, Sunny realized that all types of physical activities were out of the question. Not only because Effie was going to win every damn game, but also because Cassie couldn't participate in most.

If that was the case, they would have to settle for a battle of wit, instead.

After thinking for a while, he made a few preparations and addressed his companions in a mischievous tone:

"Alright, let's have another competition. This time, it will be a challenge for your minds."

Sunny paused for a few moments and then smiled.

"And to spice things up, this time, there will be a prize. The winner will get this!"

With that, he produced the ascended soul shard that he had gotten from the Corpse Eater from behind his back and showed it to everyone. The beautiful crystal shined with an alluring, ethereal light.

Except for Nephis, who was resting with her eyes closed, everyone stared at the shard with a lot of interest. Sunny grinned.

Of course, they were interested! It was very rare to see one of these, after all.

He didn't really have a use for this thing right now, though. And making the cohort stronger would, in turn, increase his own chances of getting through the expedition alive. So parting with the shard was not that detrimental.

Especially if he could have some fun in return.

Effie was the first one to speak:

"What are the terms of the competition?"

Sunny put the crystal away before answering:

"It's really simple. I'll give you a riddle, and the first person to answer correctly wins. How does that sound?"

The huntress looked at him with doubt and shrugged.

"Sounds boring. But alright, let's play."

Smiling, Sunny commanded the shadow to separate from him and put the Ordinary Rock on it. Then, he turned to Effie and said:

"Listen carefully. Imagine if you will that the two of us, my shadow and I, are in possession of a rare treasure. One of us is an honorable, extremely attractive Awakened that can tell no lie, while the other one is a vile, ugly, stupid devil that would never tell a word of truth. But you don't know which one is which."

Effie grinned.

"I mean... isn't it obvious?"

Sunny blinked.

"Shut up! Also, it's an imaginary situation. Okay? Anyway, you have to find out which one of us is hiding the treasure. If you do, you'll get the treasure. If you don't, the devil will kill you. You can only ask one question, either to me or the shadow. Understand?"

The huntress giggled and flexed her muscles.

"Can I just beat the answer out of you?"

Sunny observed her vigorous figure for a moment too long, and then smiled.

"You can. Also, you're dead."

Effie stared at him in bewilderment.

"What? Why?!"

He shrugged and glanced in her direction with disdain.

"Did I not tell you that you can only ask one question? Well who told you to ask whether you can beat me up or not? What a stupid way to waste a question!"

P AND A N OVEL While the unruly was huntress was throwing daggers at him with her eyes, Sunny turned away and said:

"Next!"

Kai smiled apologetically at Effie and approached him.

"Alright, Night. What's your question? Do consider that our roles might have changed since the last round."

The charming young man gestured at the marble beneath his feet and addressed the shadow:

"What color is the stone I am pointing to?"

Since Sunny had expected such a turn of events, the Ordinary Rock immediately answered in the deepest voice he could muster.panda novel

"...White."

Kai looked at Sunny with a triumphant smile and said:

"So... I win? The shadow is obviously the honorable Awakened."

Sunny gave him a nod.

"You indeed learned which one of us is a dirty liar. Surprise... it was me. However, that was not the task. The task was to find out which one of us is

hiding the treasure, and you have already used up your only question. So... sorry, buddy, but you're also dead. I'll miss you very much! In this hypothetical situation..."

The charming archer sighed and looked at him with reproach. Sunny raised his eyebrows.

"What? Why are you looking at me like this? Be grateful that I allowed you to play at all! With your Flaw, you are like a walking cheat as far as this game is concerned."

He scowled, then added:

"In fact, the mere fact that you claim to have a Flaw is an affront to us, truly Flawed people!"

Kai lingered for a bit and walked to the side to sit near Effie. Sunny had to suppress his laugh when he noticed that the boisterous huntress reacted to being this close to the charming young man's deific body pretty much exactly the same as he himself sometimes reacted to her.

'Get your head out of the gutter! Pure thoughts, Effie!'

A wide grin still found its way onto his face. Shaking his head, Sunny turned away to call the next contestant, but Kai suddenly spoke, interrupting him:

"You're not entirely right, you know," he said gently.

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"About what?"

The archer looked down before answering.

"About my Flaw. Yes, it is not as heavy of a burden as many others have to carry. But it's still a curse."

'What is he talking about? It's almost entirely like a second Aspect Ability!'

Looking at Kai with a doubtful expression, Sunny asked:

"Yeah? How, exactly? Please explain, because I really can't think of a situation where this Flaw of yours could be a burden."

The beautiful young man was silent for a while, and then looked up at Sunny with a sad smile.

"Imagine hearing the person who is the most important to you in the whole wide world telling you that they love you, only to realize that they don't. Imagine listening to your friend's words of encouragement, only to understand that he secretly wishes for you to crash and burn..."

He sighed.

"Ignorance is bliss, Sunny. After returning from my First Nightmare, I had to come to terms with the fact that most of the people in my life were not who I thought they were. And that what hid behind their smiles was ugly and vicious."

Kai gestured to himself and said:

"Because of who I am... and how I am... there was always a whirlpool of people around me. But after learning their true faces, I couldn't... well. Let's just say that, if I had the choice, I would have preferred to stay blissfully blind to the truth forever."

He grew quiet.

'Damn.'

Suddenly, Kai smiled.

"But that's why I enjoy spending time with you so much, Sunny! No matter how bizarre the things you say are, they're always true. I never met anyone as stupidly honest as you. It's very refreshing!"

Sunny shifted uncomfortably.

'Uh... did he just call me stupid?'

Now he was kind of sorry for mocking the charming young man about his Flaw. Perhaps it would be useful to someone like Sunny. But to a person like Kai, who always attracted the worst kind of attention from people, it could really be incredibly painful.

The Spell knew what it was doing.

It always hit you in your most vulnerable spot.

'Damned Spell. The being that weaved it must have been the worst kind of a sick bastard...'

Chapter 212: Knights And Knaves

"Uh... sure."

One day Kai would inevitably learn that Sunny was not as honest of a person as he considered him to be, but until then, having the naive archer believe in this ridiculous notion was rather... beneficial.

Turning away with a bit of awkwardness, Sunny glanced at Caster and called:

"Next!"

The proud Legacy was looking at Nightingale with a heavy expression. Hearing Sunny's voice, he lingered for a moment and then shook his head.

It seemed that Caster did not want to play his game.

Sunny was also suddenly painfully aware that between the six of them, four people had openly shared their Flaws with the rest, be it out of necessity or because of trust. Only two had not.

One of the two was Sunny, and the other one was Caster.

Sunny knew why he was hiding his Flaw from everyone, but what was the proud scion's reason? It sort of went against his whole honorable and dependable persona. With how devoted he acted toward Nephis and the cohort, it was strange to see him keeping secrets.

Was his reason the same as Sunny's, a dire vulnerability that the Flaw would uncover? Or was there some other reason? Maybe he didn't trust the members of the cohort as much as he tried to make them think he did.

And if so... why?

With a shrug, Sunny left Caster alone. There was no point in lingering on these thoughts now. Until he had more information, any conclusion he

could make would be useless, anyway.

Looking at Cassie, he smiled and said:

"Hey, Cas. Wanna give it a try?"

The blind girl hesitated for a bit, and then slowly approached him.

While she was walking over, Sunny couldn't help but think back to a conversation he had with her in the distant past. Back then, Cassie had told him that knowledge could be the heaviest thing in the world. The burden of her Flaw, while completely different from Kai's, was at the same time eerily similar.

They both longed for the bliss of ignorance, but were doomed to always bear the crushing weight of unwanted knowledge.

When Sunny thought about it, he found that all members of the cohort were connected with each other by invisible strings. Many things about them were like reflections, simultaneously the same, but also completely opposite.

Like the fact that he could tell no lie, while Kai could not be lied to. Or the fact that Nephis was like sunlight, while he was made of shadows. Cassie could not see, while he had basically two pairs of eyes. Changing Star dreamed of destroying the Nightmare Spell, but Effie dreamed of making it her paradise.

And so on.

Were these the strings of fate? Or was he just making empty connections because that was what humans were prone to do?

Come to think of it, only Caster didn't seem to be connected to any of them in any kind of a meaningful way. What was that all about?

Cassie sat down near Sunny, pulling him out of his thoughts.

He forced out a smile.

"Ah, right. Just like I said, the roles might have switched. So, what is your question?"

Cassie smiled and gestured to the shadow.

"My question is: if I were to ask Sunny which one of you has the treasure, what would he say?"

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then gave the Ordinary Stone a mental command to speak one of the answers that he had whispered to it in advance.

In the same comically deep voice, the shadow seemed to speak:

"...The shadow has it."

Cassie nodded and turned to Sunny with subtle glee on her exquisite, doll-like face.

"Sunny, you have the treasure. Give."

With that, she expectantly outstretched her hand.

With a disappointed sigh, Sunny put the ascended soul shard in her palm and said in a listless voice:panda novel

"Congratulations. You've won. Great job, yay."

Cassie grasped the shard and giggled.

Meanwhile, Effie leaned forward with a bewildered look:

"What?! That's it?!"

She stared at the blind girl in astonishment, and then asked:

P AND A N OVEL "How the hell did you do it?"

Cassie smiled and crushed the shard in her small fist, absorbing the soul essence. Then, she shook her head and said:

"It's simple, really. No matter who you ask about the other person's answer, their answer will always be the opposite of the correct one. That's because the Awakened would have to tell the truth about the lie, while the devil would have to tell a lie about the truth. Do you understand?"

Effie thought for a moment, then shook her head.

"Nope. All the words you said seem to be familiar, but I don't understand crap. What do you even mean?"

Cassie laughed.

"Well, you should think about it in your free time. Or, you know... just beat Sunny up the next time he decides to tease you with such riddles."

With that, she went away, quite happy with herself.

Sunny watched her go with his mouth wide open.

'Did she really just say that?!'

Meanwhile, the perplexed huntress was staring at Sunny with a deep frown.

"Yeah... I might just do that the next time..."

He paled.

"What's up with that? This was an honest competition! Don't be a sore loser!"

Effie grinned menacingly.

"Sore? Let's see which one of use will be sore when I'm done with you."

'What... what kind of soreness does she mean, I wonder? Wait, no! Why would I wonder about that?!'

Standing up, Sunny glanced at Effie and scoffed.

"Who's going to be done with who? Don't flatter yourself, beanpole."

With that, he walked away with contempt clearly written all over his face.

His pace, however, was suspiciously hurried.

A while later, the day was drawing to a close. Some of the Memories had already restored themselves, so almost everyone was wearing their clothes and armors.

Which, as far as Sunny was concerned, was a real shame.

...From a purely aesthetic point of view, of course!

However, something else attracted his full attention.

At the far end of the marble arch, Nephis and Caster were standing facing each other, with sharp swords in their hands.

They were about to clash...

Chapter 213: Sword Saints | Shadow Slave

Back when Nephis was teaching Sunny how to use the sword, he had never been good enough to be her sparring partner. Once he learned enough to be of any use in a training fight, their fragile alliance had already broken and shattered to pieces.

So, apart from that short altercation on the somber slopes of the Ashen Barrow, they had never actually crossed swords with each other.

Now, it seemed, Changing Star had found a reliable sparring partner. Caster had not only replaced Sunny as her right-hand man, but also filled the roles that Sunny had been either reluctant or unfit to take on.

'Well... good for them.'

Once the Memories of the cohort were close to being fully restored, Nephis and Caster moved to the far end of the white arch to practice. Now, they were standing opposite each other, ready to begin.

Although no one called him over, Sunny approached the two Legacies and sat down, ready to enjoy the spectacle. He was keenly interested in observing these two immensely skilled swordsmen in action.

Both of them had been trained for combat from the day they could walk. Watching them would surely be helpful to his understanding of battle styles and techniques. Not to mention that he was very interested to see the rematch between Nephis and Caster. The last time he saw them fight, Changing Star had lost, but not by much.

She also had held back her Aspect Ability at that time, but he doubted that that would change today. Neph's flame could be used both to heal and annihilate, but sadly, not to train.

Caster glanced at him and frowned with visible displeasure.

Was he irritated because Sunny was about to learn a thing or two about his technique, or because Sunny was ruining his alone time with Nephis?

'Either way, I don't care.'

"What are you doing?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Watching. Why? Does this part of the arch belongs to your clan or something?"

The proud Legacy shook his head and turned away.

"Do as you wish."

Neph glanced at Sunny and didn't say anything. However, he could tell that she didn't mind.

In fact, it was almost as if she was approving of his decision.

Without wasting any more time, the two of them clashed in a whirlwind of steel, moving with the kind of speed that made it difficult for Sunny to follow along. The clangor of swords filled the air.

A bit stunned, he stared at the furious fight with a blank expression.

'...Damn.'

After the months of hunting monsters in the Dark City and his lessons with the Stone Saint, Sunny thought that he had developed his skill a lot. And he did. It's just that compared to Nephis and Caster, he was still so far behind that it was nothing short of disheartening.

Before, he had sometimes entertained the thought of maybe being able to stand against them... well, at least one of them... on equal ground. But now, this illusion was ruthlessly broken.

If things went south and he ended up on the opposite sides of the barricades with Caster, facing him would be tantamount to committing suicide. For now, at least.

Which, of course, simply meant that instead of facing him, Sunny would have to stab him in the back.

'Duly noted.'

He wasn't going to take on an enemy of this caliber in a forthright manner, anyway. What was he, a fool?

Concentrating on the fight, Sunny watched attentively. With the benefit of his new experience, he was able to discern more and learn more from how these two experts moved and acted. Sometimes, he was even able to predict what they were going to do next.

However, as time passed, a subtle frown appeared on his face.

'What is she doing? That doesn't make sense.'

Sunny had been able to notice two unexpected things from how Nephis fought against Caster.

The first one was rather easy to spot. While Caster did not use the full extent of his incredible speed, he did use a fair share of it, making it almost impossible for Nephis to win any of their matches. She lost much more than she won, almost always by a few fractions of a second. Which was seemingly not conducive to training at all.

What was the point of training if one of the participants had almost no chance of winning because of how large the gap between them and their opponent was? There was a reason why Neph had never used Sunny as a sparring partner in the past, after all.

But then, with a bit of amusement, he realized that Changing Star was doing exactly what he had done with the Stone Saint. She was tempering herself

against an overwhelming force. That's why she had instructed Caster to use just enough of his Aspect Ability to always be much faster than her.

Losing in a fight against a superior opponent was truly the best way to learn.

'Ha! So I was right in my approach, after all.'

If Changing Star was doing the same, he had to be right.

The second thing he had noticed, however, was much more perplexing.

It was that Nephis was not using her usual flowing and unpredictable battle style. Instead, she was moving with precise and firm elegance, hiding behind a carefully woven wall of defense and patiently waiting for an opening to appear — instead of creating one herself.

While intricate and impressive, this style was still a bit lacking in comparison to her real one. What's more, while it was deliberate and dependable, it was also rigid.

If there was one thing that Nephis would never tolerate in her battle art, it was rigidity. Her whole worldview was built around the idea that nothing had more value than adaptability. That's why the style she had taught Sunny suited her so well.

It was designed to be the epitome of changeability.

So, the question was...

Why the hell she was using something so alien to her against Caster?

The answer was pretty obvious. Either Nephis was trying to experiment with something new in an effort to adopt elements of this style into her own... which didn't seem very likely...

Or she didn't want Caster to know her true combat style too well, for some reason.

But what could that reason be?

Sunny rubbed his chin.

'Interesting...'

Chapter 214: Transient Shadow | Shadow Slave

214 Transient Shadow

Did Nephis distrust Caster for some reason?

Sunny surely did, and to be entirely honest, he didn't even need any reason to do so. His intuition and general paranoia were enough.

But Changing Star was different. He had learned a bitter lesson and now knew that everything she ever did had a firm logic behind it. Even if that logic was entirely different from that of a normal person.

So if Nephis was hiding her true battle style from Caster, there was a reason for it.

But it didn't make any sense. From everything else that she had done, he was her most trusted lieutenant. Changing Star entrusted more to Caster than she ever had to anyone else. Caster himself also had never acted against Nephis's interests.

In fact, he was even a bit too loyal. The bastard was always near Nephis, as though glued to her side. He also didn't seem to like it when others got too close to her.

In that regard, he was almost like that flying rapier of Cassie's. During their entire day on the marble arch, the unfriendly Echo somehow always managed to remain between the blind girl and any men who tried to approach her for whatever reason. The message it was sending was quite clear.

I'm watching you!

It was honestly rather comical.

Sunny shook his head. The dynamic of Changing Star's relationship with Caster was really weird. But once again, he didn't have enough information

to make any conclusions. All he could do was keep his eyes open and try to sleep with one of them open when the handsome Legacy was on watch duty.

Maybe it was some strange Legacy thing? Like guarding the secrets of the clan against the prying eyes of other clans.

Who knew?

Glancing at the fighting swordsmen, Sunny suddenly got an idea.

After considering it for a bit, he looked at them again. This time, his eyes were burning.

'That... that actually might work!'

The problem with his technique at the moment was that it lacked true individuality. Sunny knew that there was a secret hiding inside his shadow that could become the foundation of his own unique battle style.

He just couldn't understand what that secret was.

His progress at deciphering it had stalled. While training, Sunny had trouble keeping his eyes both on the Stone Saint and on the shadow. Whenever he tried, the taciturn knight would inevitably send him into a sea of pain. But even if he managed it somehow, there was an invisible wall standing between him and anything even remotely resembling understanding.

He was in a dire need of a breakthrough.

So what if... his shadows tried to imitate someone else instead of him? And not just someone, but a real sword expert in the middle of a fight?

Not only would Sunny be able to observe every tiny detail of its movements, but there would also be something to compare them against.

The shadow was a part of him, after all. It was hard to tell where Sunny ended and the shadow began. That's why the difference in how it moved and how he moved was almost imperceptible.

But if it followed someone else, he would be able to separate the cadence and pattern of that person's movements from the shadow's by contrasting it against his own.

This had to work!

Burning with anticipation, Sunny waited for Nephis and Caster to take a short break, and then send the shadow over to the handsome Legacy.

Leisurely strolling over the white marble, the shadow approached Caster and brazenly glued itself to his feet. Then, it crossed its arms and glared at the Legacy with almost palpable disdain.

Caster stared at the shadow for a couple of seconds and then raised his head to look at Sunny. There was a very strange expression on his face.

"What... what are you doing?"

His voice did not sound happy at all.

Sunny shrugged with a carefree smile.

"Oh, don't mind him. This cretin just lost me an ascended soul shard. As a form of punishment, I've decided to make him your shadow for a bit. So, you know. Just do your thing and don't worry about it."

The shadow turned its head and pierced him with a menacing look.

Sunny could practically hear its thoughts...

...Who are you calling a cretin, you cretin?

'That had to be it. Did I guess right, huh? Oh, sorry. I forgot you cannot answer.'

Not paying the offended shadow any more attention, he just smiled wider.

Caster frowned, hesitated for a few moments, and then said through gritted teeth:

"I would prefer if you wouldn't."

Sunny sighed.

"Ugh, alright. Whatever."

With that, he gave the shadow the command to leave the proud Legacy alone.

It separated itself from Caster, pretended to wipe its legs in disgust... and sauntered over to Nephis, only to get attached to her feet with visible delight. It even bowed gallantly to her own shadow and made sure to not get in its way.

'What... what is this moron doing?'

Of course, Sunny had ordered the shadow to approach Neph himself. But he didn't expect it to be so visibly pleased by it.

It was as if the shadow was simply beyond itself to finally follow someone competent.

'You traitor!'

Nephis looked down on the shadow, smiled, and didn't say anything.

'Well... good. Now, fight!'

The two Legacies did not make him wait long. A few moments later, they were once again locked in a furious battle. Only this time, two shadows were following Nephis.

Both of them loyally imitated her movements, however, one of them was slightly... almost imperceptibly... different.

Sunny looked at it with an intensity that threatened to burn two holes in the white marble.

Soon, his eyes widened.

'I... I see it! I think I see it!'

There, in the tiniest difference between the way Changing Star's own shadow moved and the way his shadow moved, he finally saw it.

He had found his breakthrough.

Chapter 215: Shapeless | Shadow Slave

Observing the motions of two shadows that followed Nephis, Sunny was finally able to understand the foundation of the elusive shadow style.

Before, he only sensed a hint of its essence. He knew that just like the shadow, the hidden battle art was insidious, shapeless, and everchanging. But this was where lay the problem: a battle style was, by definition, a structured framework of patterns and principles, a doctrine that dictated how one should act to defeat an enemy.

That doctrine was used as a foundation and expanded into a variety of specific movements to create a style.

But If something didn't have a shape and its form was constantly changing, how could it ever be stable and structured? Sunny had no idea how the concepts he felt were at the core of the shadow style could create something even remotely applicable to practice.

Insidious, shapeless, everchanging. What was he supposed to do with that?

But now, he understood. The key to it all was so simple and evident that he almost laughed. Why had he not guessed earlier? It was so obvious.

The idea that tied everything together was as innate to the nature of shadows as formlessness and elusiveness.

It was imitation.

After all, what were the first two things that came to mind when one thought about shadows? That they lived in the dark and imitated the things that hid them from light.

The foundation of the shadow style was indeed insidious, shapeless, and everchanging. Its core concept was to steal that which made the enemy strong and use it to destroy them.

To master that style, he had to learn how to behave like a shadow.

Sunny stared at Nephis and Caster, but didn't see them. His mind was consumed completely by the sudden revelation. He had no time to pay attention to their fight anymore.

This style... this style had endless potential. If he managed to master it, he would be able to counter any style or technique used against him, not to mention become an immensely unpredictable opponent.

What could be more unpredictable than a formless shadow?

Of course, it was easier said than done. To begin with, while the ability to imitate the enemy was incredibly powerful, it also demanded an incredible amount of talent, experience, and insight from the user. You couldn't imitate that which you didn't understand, after all.

More importantly, this was just the foundation of the style. He still had to expand it into the actual collection of specific principles... and retrain himself accordingly.

That was a mammoth task.

Creating a complete style from scratch could take a true battle master years, if not decades. Sunny had not even scratched the surface of this ambitious undertaking.

However, this was alright. It was a start. Personal battle arts were not created in an instance, anyway. It was a long and arduous process, with endless iterations coming and going while being tempered by the crucible of combat.

It's not like the style would be useless until it became perfect.

Sunny just had to get it to the point where it could be applied in battle in one form or another. That alone would tremendously enhance his technique.

He smiled, congratulating himself. However, the next moment, a deep scowl appeared on his face.

'Uh... but how, exactly, am I supposed to do that?'

A while later, when the sun was already touching the western horizon, Sunny was sitting by himself and staring at his shadow. He was motionless like a statue and deep in thought. On his face, there was a troubled frown.

When someone approached him, Sunny lingered for a few moments and then slowly looked up to see who was disturbing him.

To his surprise, it was Nephis.

The leader of their cohort stood there for a bit, her graceful figure illuminated by the setting sun. Then, she sat down near him.

Sunny blinked.

"Uh... hey Neph."

Npehis gave him a nod.

"Hey, Sunny."

He waited for a few moments, and then asked:

"...Did you want something?"

The corner of her mouth slightly curled upward. With a sigh, Changing Star glanced at him and said:

"It's nothing much. I just wanted to say that I saw you fighting in the catacombs. You have improved a lot in these three months. Well done."

Sunny smiled.

"Ah, that. Well, it's not like there's a lot of opportunities to lead a peaceful life in the Dark City. I was bound to improve a little, no?"

She shook her head.

"Don't sell yourself short. You really did well. Very few would have been able to grow so much and as fast as you. Especially without a teacher."

After hesitating for a while, Sunny shrugged.

"You said it yourself. One real battle is worth more than a thousand hours of training. There was... a lot of battles. In those three months."

Nephis nodded, and then asked:

"That firm and grounded style you weaved into your technique... where did it come from?"

He scratched the back of his head and, remembering the hellish training sessions with his pet monster, held back the urge to shiver.

"I just observed how the Stone Saint fought and tried to replicate it."

Changing Star smiled:

"As I thought. I've seen her fight, too. It's a very formidable Echo. One of the finest I've ever seen."

Coming from a Legacy, this meant a lot. Sunny was indeed really lucky to be in the right place at the right time to get the Echo of the Stone Saint. If the Fallen siblings of the iron spiders had not brought her to the brink of death, he would never have been able to survive a battle with the living statue, let alone defeat her.

He was even luckier to have a Divine Aspect that allowed him to turn Echoes into creatures that were even more fearsome.

All in all, Sunny was extremely fortunate.

His fortune was exactly as incredible as his misfortune.

He grinned.

"You know my Attributes. I do get lucky a lot."

She lingered for a few moments, and then said:

"I'm glad that you were able to understand the true design of the battle style I taught you."

So he was right on this point, too. The style Changing Star had given him was indeed designed to be as adaptable as possible and seamlessly incorporate elements of other styles. It was a perfect foundational battle art... for those talented enough to make use of it, of course.

Which were, most likely, extremely few and far between.

Sunny glanced at Nephis and, after some deliberation, asked:

"That style of yours is truly unique. Where did it come from?"

He had been too inexperienced to realize this at the time, but what Neph had taught him could have been considered a rare treasure. The style he took for granted was, in fact, a work of pure genius. It deserved to be famous and ubiquitous.

But it was not. Which suggested that this treasure was a secret one.

Changing Star lingered for a bit, and then said:

"It's a part of my inheritance."

Sunny blinked and stared at her, stunned.

'Then... then why the hell did she teach it to me?!

Chapter 216: Tacit Understanding | Shadow Slave

Sunny stared at Nephis with a complicated expression. After a while, he asked:

"Why did you entrust me with something so precious?"

She glanced at him, lingered for a few moments, then shrugged.

"We had a deal, remember? My knowledge in exchange for your share of the spoils we earn."

There had indeed existed such a deal. However, he had not exactly acted in good faith when proposing it. After all, he had no use for those spoils, in the first place.

Sunny scowled. If Changing Star had really revealed a family secret to him because of a lie, she had a valid reason to be resentful of him.

Just like he was of her.

With a dark smile, he looked away and said:

"You must have realized by now that I have cheated you in that deal."

Nephis turned to him and said, her voice calm and even:

"You mean the fact that you don't need to absorb soul shard to grow stronger?"

Sunny froze for a moment, then gave her a nod.

"You don't seem very surprised."

Figures. When Sunny first learned about this ability of his, he was stunned. But Nephe seemed to know a lot more than a normal person did.

She didn't even try to pretend otherwise.

"It's a very rare Aspect trait, but not unheard of among the upper echelons of the Awakened. In fact, I am capable of something like that myself. Although your case does seem to be especially unique."

Sunny glanced at her.

"How so?"

Changing Star remained silent for a few moments and then said, her voice hinted with a bit of wonder:

"Usually, when an Awakened absorbs the soul essence directly, the process leaves the remnants of the soul core empty. But when you do it, the shards are left brimming with it. This is very... unusual."

He shifted uncomfortably, and then said:

"Yeah, well... you have your share of secrets, too, Neph. Don't think that I didn't notice. Lineage Memories, Domains..."

Nephis interrupted him with a heavy gaze. When Sunny fell silent and looked at her with a frown, she said in a strangely somber tone:

"Never say those words aloud again, Sunny. I am serious. Just knowing them might get you killed."

He stared at her for a long time, and then scoffed.

"No problem. Since you showed me the courtesy of not prying into my secrets, I won't pry into yours. I don't really want to know, anyway. The mysterious "upper echelons" you mentioned can play their dirty little games all they want, as long as they leave me out of them."

Then, Sunny frowned and added:

"But there is one question I have to ask you, because it involves me personally."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Sure. Ask away."

He grimaced.

"Why are you hiding the true core of your technique from Caster?"

Changing Star looked at him for a bit, and then smiled.

"So you've noticed. That's good, too. Yes... I've been using a different style when facing Caster."

Sunny looked at her with a humorless expression.

"Why?"

She shrugged.

"Why did you incorporate elements of the Stone Saint's technique into your own?"

He shook his head.

"To become stronger. Also, nice try at misdirection, but I won't fall for your tricks. I'm the one who taught them to you, remember? So just stop. Answer my question."

Nephis sighed and turned away, glancing at the silhouette of the Crimson Spire that loomed in the distance. After a while, she said:

"I'll answer you when we return to the Dark City. It won't change anything until then, anyway. Your safety won't be compromised in any way."

'What is that supposed to mean?'

As he glared at her, Changing Star stood up and turned to leave. Before that, however, she lingered for a moment and said:

"Keep sharpening your sword, Sunny. I expect big things from you."

With that, she walked away, leaving him speechless.

'And what does she mean by that?!

After Nephis left, Sunny returned to staring at his shadow. However, despite the fact that he had figured out the essence and foundation of the elusive battle art that hid inside it, he had no idea how to go about creating an actual style out of them.

He did not have enough experience and mastery to be able to create something out of nothing. It was a dead end.

'Curses! Why even hide that damn mystery inside the Aspect if I can't do anything with it?!

Perhaps in the distant future, he would be able to. But right now, it was as though he had found the door, but was not strong enough to turn the key and unlock it. It just stood there and teased him endlessly, just like the damn Gateway inside the Crimson Spire.

It was pure torture.

'Maybe I wasn't supposed to notice the existence of the hidden style so soon...'

But he did! And he worked so hard to gain insight into its secrets. Was it all for nothing? All the pain, all the effort?

Why would Spell do this to him?

'Do you have to ask? That's the damn Spell we're talking about! Why wouldn't it do something like this to you?"

With a bitter sigh, Sunny turned away and tried to forget all about the shadow, techniques, and battle styles. It was almost dark, anyway.

'Time to sleep.'

Walking over to the center of the marble arch, Sunny lay down beside the other members of the cohort and tiredly closed his eyes.

The beach vacation was over. It was funny, visually stunning, and unexpectedly emotional... but ended on a bitter note.

Tomorrow was going to be another long day.

'To hell with this. This... this...'

Exhausted by all of it, he fell asleep before even finishing the thought.

'...this crap.'

Sunny opened his eyes and looked around in confusion.

The world was enveloped in a strange, dim twilight. Deep shadows surrounded him, shrouding the tall walls that were cut from black marble. Looking between the mighty columns, Sunny saw the black circle of the sun burning in the lightless sky.

'An... an eclipse?'

No, wait... what walls? What columns? Wasn't he supposed to be sleeping at the top of the white arch?

...What was happening?

Suddenly, a woman's scream tore the silence like a sharp knife. It was full of pain and suffering. Sunny tried to summon the Midnight Shard into his hand... only to realize that he had no hands.

Then, something else resounded from the darkness.

...A baby's cry.

'Wh—what the...'

Almost at the same time, Sunny realized something terrible.

This was a dream. He was dreaming.

...People were not supposed to dream in the Dream Realm!

'...Not good!'

Chapter 217: Origin | Shadow Slave

When Sunny realized that he was dreaming, the first thing that came to his mind was that there was another soul tree growing somewhere near the white arch. However, after a few moments of panic, he quickly dismissed this idea.

After all, he had never actually dreamt while under the mind hex of the ancient fiend. He had just mistaken the broken memories of his conversation with Cassie for a dream.

But this... this one was real.

The dreamscape that surrounded Sunny was ephemeral, shifting, and shrouded in shadows. Above him, the sun was like a circle of darkness, with crimson light drowning in a burning sea of clouds. However, none of that light reached him.

In the tenebrous hall of black marble, there was nothing but empty silence.

...Which was now destroyed by the sound of a baby crying, of course.

The woman's screams had long grown silent. Peering into the stygian depths of the dark marble hall, Sunny saw nothing but endless shadows. The baby's cries were coming from somewhere beyond them.

...Or from within them.

A subtle thought entered Sunny's mind. The monumental walls, the colossal columns, the grandiose hall... all of it looked strangely familiar. As though he had already been here once, a long time ago.

All that was missing were the signs of desolation and a large altar cut from a single block of black marble. In fact, it should have been standing right where the crying sounds were coming from.

Familiar words appeared in his mind, now full of new meaning.

'...Child of Shadows?'

In the next moment, everything disappeared.

The world was swaying. A seemingly endless surface of black stone was flowing past his vision, moving up and down.

...No, it wasn't the stone, but Sunny himself. He was the one swaying.

'Wh—what?!'

In fact, Sunny found himself in the body... of a toddler. He was currently held gently by a young woman who was walking down a long stone corridor, which was dimly lit by burning torches. Hence, the swaying.

The girl was very young, not older than Sunny himself — his actual body, that is. She was slender and exquisitely beautiful, with soft porcelain skin and long raven hair. The lissome beauty was dressed in a flowing silk tunic that left her delicate neck and shoulders exposed.

A black serpent was coiled around her arms and neck, its scales so intricately tattooed that sometimes, it seemed as though the creature was moving. Whoever marked the girl's skin with this image was a true genius of their craft. Sunny had never seen anything like it in the real world.

However, he had seen similar markings in a Nightmare.

...This was the mark of a slave who belonged to the Shadow God.

The young girl was a temple slave, just like he had been in his First Nightmare. The serpent coiled around her neck and arms served both as her collar and her shackles.

She was also the toddler's mother. Sunny could tell from the love with which she held the child and the quiet smile that appeared on her face every time she looked at him.

Sunny might have lost his own mother at a young age, but he still remembered that much, at least.

'If the mother is a slave, then the child is, too.'

Finally, Sunny began to understand what was happening to him.

The dream he found himself in did not belong to him. Instead, it belonged to the nameless temple slave whose role he had assumed during the First Nightmare.

The original child of shadows.

This vision was his memory.

Soon, the young girl entered a vast hall that was shrouded in darkness. Judging by the black marble walls, they were in another part of the ancient temple. Sunny couldn't see much of his surroundings, but he could somehow tell that they were underground.

In the center of the hall, seven tall braziers were burning with strange, pale flames. On the edges of light, motionless, stood a dozen or so people.

Sunny shivered, suddenly reminded of the silent shadows populating his Soul Sea. However, these were not ghosts, but humans. There were several other slaves, while the rest appeared to be priests.

To tell the truth, there was not a lot of difference between them. It seemed as though the servants of the Shadow God did not pursue opulence and status. In fact, many of the priests bore the same markings as the slaves, suggesting that they themselves had belonged to the temple once.

'What are they doing here? What is happening?'

Approaching one of the elder slaves, the young beauty entrusted the child to her. Separated from the warmth of his mother's chest, the toddler...

Sunny... felt cold and scared. However, the older woman consoled him with gentle words, preventing the child from crying.

Then, she moved back to stand with the rest of the people gathered in the underground hall. Their faces were calm and solemn.

The young woman, meanwhile, slowly walked into the circle of light. Her movements were elegant, flowing, and graceful.

Stopping at the very center, she stood motionlessly between the seven pale flames, surrounded by seven shadows.

Sunny stared at the beautiful slave, feeling that something important was about to happen.

But... what?

As he became pensive and uneasy, a sudden sound broke the silence. It was the deep and reverberating ringing of a zither.

As the musical instrument sang, the slave girl suddenly moved.

As she did, her seven shadows moved with her.

'This... this is...'

With his eyes wide open, Sunny watched the young woman.

She was dancing.

The beautiful slave danced in the circle of light surrounded by impenetrable darkness, her every move full of indescribable grace and clear, but elusive purpose. Her young body was flexible and lithe, but also strong and trained as much as a warrior's. Her skill as a dancer was like that of a battle master.

It was mesmerizing.

The young woman weaved a beautiful pattern with her movements, their cadence and nature simultaneously firm and flowing, sharp and gentle, clear

and unpredictable. She danced alone but also with seven partners, effortlessly controlling both her own body and the seven shadows cast by it.

At times, it was hard to tell which one of them was real.

Her dance was... insidious, shapeless, and everchanging.

Sunny froze.

He recognized these movements. They were the same as how his shadow moved.

This was the source and origin of the battle style he wanted to create

This was Shadow Dance...

Chapter 218: Shadow Dance | Shadow Slave

Sunny opened his eyes.

The grand arch of white marble was exactly the same as when he had last seen it. The sun was already climbing the grey dome of the sky, chasing the remnants of the dark sea away. The rest of the cohort had woken up some time ago and were now preparing for the journey ahead.

He had overslept.

However, it didn't matter.

With eyes burning with excitement, Sunny sat up and recalled everything that he had witnessed in his dream.

The memories were still there, clear as day. He could recall every movement, every step, every breath of the dance that the beautiful slave had performed.

..The nameless slave's mother.

His eyes dimmed slightly.

That dream of his, while a precious gift, was also a source of numerous questions. Now that he was awake, Sunny was able to see a few things with more clarity.

The scene that he had witnessed at the very beginning of it was that of the nameless slave's... the original Child of Shadow's... birth. He was born during a solar eclipse, not unlike Sunny.

That fact put a lot of things into perspective. Everyone knew that the Spell did not choose the role an Aspirant would play during their First Nightmare randomly. That was apparent from the fact that the bodies they inhabited in it, while different, were very close to their real ones.

However, the actual principle of how the Spell chose these roles and the events of the Nightmares were largely unclear.

But now, Sunny knew that he shared more than simply outer appearance with the temple slave whose body he inhabited for a few short days.

Both of them were born in similar, extremely rare circumstances. Both of them were at the very bottom of society, oppressed and unwanted, surviving against all odds instead of because of them.

Both of them were left without a family at a young age. The tough life in the outskirts took Sunny's parents and sister away. To the nameless slave, it was the servants of the mighty War God that destroyed his childhood home and life. Sunny didn't know what happened to the beautiful dancer after the last temple of Shadows was destroyed by them... but he doubted that it was anything good.

With a heavy sigh, he looked down.

...Fate. It was fate. What he shared with the temple slave was a similarity of fate.

Sunny was growing more and more convinced that the Spell was connected to the Strings of Fate in some way.

Perhaps it was weaved from them.

Remembering the void he had found himself in after completing his first trial, Sunny looked into the distance with wonder. That void was filled with a myriad of stars that served as nexuses for an inconceivably complex net made of countless strings of silver light.

Were those the strings of fate?

He shook his head.

Whatever they were, and whatever the Spell was, it was not something he could know or understand... yet. Numerous people, most of them better informed and smarter than him, had tried and failed.

It was wiser to concentrate on something within his reach.

The Shadow Dance!

Sunny smiled.

He wasn't so engrossed by the dancing of the beautiful slave girl because it was truly stunning and enchanting. He was riveted beyond belief by it because he recognized the pattern of the battle style hiding in his shadow in her graceful movements.

Turns out, it wasn't a battle art at all. It was a dance.

But was there a difference?

Not in this case, not really.

It wasn't a coincidence that people often described the way true masters of battle fought as dancing. At their core, fighting and dance were very close. That's why combat, when brought to a truly impressive level, was like a dance.

So why couldn't a dance, when mastered to perfection, be like a battle art?

Sunny was certain that he was right. He had already comprehended the essence of Shadow Dance and gained insight into its foundation. With the memory of the beautiful dancer moving as one with her seven shadows, he now had the last piece of the puzzle — the actual set of moves and principles that he could use to create an actual battle style in their image.

He didn't have the battle art yet, but he did now possess all the components needed to create it.

Of course, it was not going to be easy. Even with all that knowledge stored in his mind, he would still have to spend a lot of time and effort and spill a lot of blood, both his own and that of his enemies, to turn the graceful dance of the beautiful slave girl into a deadly dance of steel.

It wasn't even certain that he would succeed.

But Sunny would be damned if he wasn't going to try.

Shadow Dance would become his personal battle art. He was going to make it happen.

As if echoing his last thought, the familiar voice of the Spell suddenly whispered into his ear.

When Sunny heard what she said, his eyes widened.

[You have received an Aspect Legacy, Shadow Dance.]

Sunny stared into the emptiness, stunned to his core by what the Spell had just whispered.

Aspect Legacy... did it really just say those words?

He gulped.

Aspect Legacy was something that every Aspect contained, but very few Awakened ever received. Unlike the Boon of the First Nightmare, and every Nightmare after that, as well as the reward Sleepers received after returning from the Dream Realm for the first time, each Aspect Legacy had a unique set of requirements that the owner of the Aspect had to meet to unlock it.

When they did, they were rewarded with a powerful relic. Usually, it was a Memory that synergized perfectly with their Aspect Abilities, or sometimes even an Echo.

Legacy clans weren't called that accidentally. While not every clan possessed an Aspect Legacy, most of them did. In fact, it was the acquisition of the Aspect Legacy that laid the foundation for the creation of many of these clans.

By now, some of the most powerful clans even had several.

But getting an Aspect Legacy was not an easy feat. Most of them were received by Saints, followed by Master, and only a few were won by mere Awakened.

Getting the Aspect Legacy while still being a Sleeper... that was simply unheard of.

'Just like getting a True Name during the First Nightmare, I guess.'

Sunny couldn't believe his luck. Of course, he worked bitterly hard to be able to grasp it. And yet, the magnitude of the harvest he reaped was utterly unbelievable.

However... why was his Aspect Legacy not a Memory, but a battle art?

That was really strange.

Not wasting any time, Sunny summoned the runes and hungrily searched for new ones.

...What he saw made him tremble.

Chapter 219: Relics of the Past

Right there in the glimmering field of familiar runes, in the cluster describing his Aspect, a new string of them appeared.

Aspect: [Shadow Slave].

Aspect Rank: Divine.

Aspect Abilities: [Shadow Control].

Aspect Legacy: [Shadow Dance].

As soon as Sunny concentrated on the Aspect Legacy, new runes shined to describe it.

Shadow Dance Description: [Once an elegant dance, now a deadly battle art. This mysterious style was created by the treacherous Lost From Light after witnessing a graceful slave dancing with her shadows. Who else could have taken something so beautiful and turned it into something so vile?]

Sunny coughed, trying hard not to think too much about the manner in which the Spell had described him.

'Again with this treacherous stuff... I'm not that treacherous, okay? So what if I lie, manipulate, and backstab people all the time. That's just being smart...'

However, what grabbed his attention was not the description itself, but what glimmered beneath it.

Shadow Dance Mastery Level: [0/7].

First Relic: Unearned.

Second Relic: Unearned.

Third Relic...

There were a total of seven lines of runes, each promising him a Legacy Relic once he achieved the corresponding level of mastery with his newly envisioned battle style.

Seven of them!

Not one, not even two or three. But seven.

Whole Legacy Clans were created around a single Legacy Relic. Sunny couldn't even imagine what he would be able to do with seven.

Start a family and turn it into the most powerful clan in the world? No, that would mean putting all his eggs into one basket. Better create several clans!

Right! Why start a family when you can start seven?

Wait, no... that didn't sound right...

Right?

Consumed by avarice, Sunny looked at the rising sun with an excited grin. This was great! This was incredible!

However, his excitement was short-lived.

'Yeah, right. I would have to get back to the real world first. And that's not going to happen...'

Turning his head slightly, he stared at the distant silhouette of the Crimson Spire and lost himself in thought.

A while later, Effie's voice brought him back to reality.

"Hey, doofus! Breakfast is ready. Why are spacing out and smiling like an idiot?"

Sunny answered without thinking.

"Just thinking about creating a Legacy Clan. Have you ever thought about creating a clan, huh, Effie?"

The robust huntress stared at him for a few seconds with a strange expression, and then grinned.

"...Is that an invitation?"

Still lost in thought, Sunny tilted his head and glanced at her astutely.

'Huh... not bad, not bad. The choice of a partner has to be of utmost importance when starting a Legacy Clan. Take Effie, for example. She is a very fearsome Awakened. Her Aspect is extravagant and powerful beyond belief. Plus, her physique is nothing short of divine. Any heir she gives birth to is bound to be both strong and gorgeous... a very suitable candidate, I guess...'

"...Huh, what? No, not an invitation. Just considering different options."

At that moment, Sunny suddenly realized that he had been unceremoniously ogling Effie up and down for a better half of a minute, and that her grin had long turned dangerous at some point.

The huntress stretched her neck and said lazily:

"I see. So you have chosen death..."

He blinked.

"No! Wait! I didn't mean it like that! I was just, you know, theorizing!"

The unruly huntress cracked her knuckles and smiled menacingly.

"Oh, so you were "theorizing" about me, huh? Do tell, do tell..."

"No, no! Wait! Stop! Sto..."

Surprisingly, Sunny survived.

...Barely.

Soon after that, they left the grandiose marble arch and continued their journey into the depths of the Labyrinth.

Before the expedition started, Nephis had told him that they had a fast and comparatively safe way to reach the southern edges of the Forgotten Shore — as much as anything could be safe in this cursed place. Without it, getting to their destination would have taken them months.

Now that they had left the Dark City, Sunny finally decided to satisfy his curiosity and asked what that mysterious method of traveling with incredible speed was. When he heard the answer, he just stared blankly at Changing Star for a few minutes, trying to guess if she was kidding or not.

She wasn't.

In the end, he didn't even ask any questions and just waved his hand dejectedly. There was no point.

If Nephis had come to know of this secret from Cassie's visions and believed that it was doable, then he did not have to worry. Too much. It's not like he could turn back now, anyway.

Plus, the expedition had shown itself to be extremely lucrative for him so far. Mere days after its start, he had already gotten plenty of shadow fragments and an Ascended Memory, not to mention making a breakthrough in his exploration of battle styles and earning an Aspect Legacy for his effort.

In any case, they had to travel about a week's worth of time south to get the chance to access that fast method of travel. The heights they were going to use on the way as shelters during the nights there were planned in advance with the help of the Forgotten Shore map Nephis had created.

To make sure that these shelters were really where the map showed and remove any possibility of ending up stranded in the middle of the Labyrinth with no way to escape the dark sea, she had even employed Kai during the week that Sunny had spent with Effie. The charming archer scouted the way ahead and confirmed that her map was correct.

Now, the only danger they really faced from the Forgotten Shore itself was that of a sudden storm. However, with a true oracle in the ranks of the cohort, this danger was dramatically diminished. Now that Cassie had grown into her powers and absorbed a lot of soul essence, she was often able to warn them in advance if something like that was going to happen.

...There were also the usual perils of the Labyrinth, of course.

And as they went deeper into its deadly maze, the situation slowly began to turn from bad to worse.

Chapter 220: So You're a Spider, So What?

As they ventured deeper into the southern reaches of the crimson Labyrinth, the situation slowly turned worse and worse.

The iron spiders that had been not too threatening to the cohort of powerful, experienced Dark City hunters at the start of it all were growing more and more deadly with each step of the way. Their numbers grew exponentially, becoming a real danger pretty soon. More and more often bigger and stronger monsters appeared at the head of the attacking beasts, bringing with them all sorts of problems.

What's worse, the spiderweb they used to trap their prey was changing, too. The metal wires from which it was weaved became so thin that it was at times almost impossible to notice it, and sharp enough to cut through armor and bone — while maintaining the resilience of superb steel.

The whole Labyrinth was covered in it, turning from crimson to dull grey.

The cohort bled much more because of the invisible webs than they did because of the spiders themselves. Of course, the iron spiders were cunning creatures, too. More often than not, they only attacked once one of the humans was caught in their nets, leading to a few really harrowing experiences for the members of Changing Star's party.

And there was a wide variety of other terrifying creatures waiting to ambush them in the twisting pathways of the crimson coral, too. What made them so dangerous was that the cohort didn't know anything about their anatomy and abilities. Every fight was a gamble, often resulting in one or several of them sustaining serious wounds.

There were three things that made the situation somewhat bearable.

The first one was Nephis and her healing flames. Although using the Aspect Ability took a toll on their leader, it was often worth it, especially if one of the members of the cohort received wounds that limited their mobility.

One thing was far more dangerous than any Nightmare Creature that lived in the Labyrinth, and it was not reaching safety before the torrent of black water flooded the Forgotten Shore, bringing inconceivable horrors with it. Thanks to Neph, they didn't have to worry about anyone slowing the cohort down.

The second reason, unexpectedly, was the iron spiders themselves. Because of the peculiar way they hunted, a lot of creatures found their deaths in the cutting embrace of the wire spiderwebs. Finding these eviscerated corpses or cocoons containing old carcasses became a common occurrence once the party invaded the depths of the spider territory.

Thanks to that, six humans were able to study and anticipate many of the monsters they had to face in this region of the Labyrinth. A lot of potentially deadly surprises had been avoided due to the cohort stumbling onto a corpse of a similar creature prior to fighting against a living one and spending some time to learn about its strengths and weaknesses.

The third reason was the Blood Arrow. In the hands of an experienced archer, it was almost as deadly as it would have been in the hands of an inexperienced one... the difference being that the latter would mostly be a danger to themselves, quickly turning into a bloodless husk.

The first time Kai had used it, Sunny experienced a disturbing feeling of shock. That time, they were facing a large group of iron spiders led by a much larger arachnid — the awakened monster of their tribe, similar in status to a carapace centurion.

These creatures were much heavier and more powerful, with thick plates of iron armor covering their bodies almost completely. Even Caster's enchanted sword had trouble cutting through their defenses. What's worse, due to the speed with which the wretched abominations moved, it was especially hard to catch them in a gap between the armor plates.

Sunny was facing two smaller iron spiders at once while the Stone Saint was butchering the third one. With his shadow observing what was happening behind his back, he didn't miss the moment when the cunning

awakened monster suddenly disengaged from Nephis and dashed into his direction, its mandibles moving in anticipation of tasting human flesh.

Calmly preparing to dodge, Sunny tensed his muscles... and narrowed his eyes.

Whistling over his shoulder, a menacing black arrow suddenly streaked through the air. Its shaft was made out of dark polished wood, with black feathers for fletching and a vicious white arrowhead that seemed to be cut from pale white bone, like a sharp fang of some terrible creature.

The arrow easily pierced the thick iron plate protecting the spider and tore deep into his body. Even though Kai messed up his shot a bit and hit the monster in its abdomen instead of the head, the results were nothing short of harrowing.

In the next moment, the awakened monster suddenly slowed down and staggered. Then, it tried to lunge forward once again, but ended up losing its balance and quickly falling to the ground. Its limbs moved slightly, quickly losing any form of cohesion.

Their movements grew slower and slower and then stopped. Beneath the iron plates, the spider's body grew taut and shriveled, like that of a mummy. Soon, it seemed completely... drained.

Sunny blinked, shaken by this disturbing image, and couldn't help but glance briefly at his forearm.

...If not for the Blood Weave, he might have ended up as a shriveled corpse, too.

He would have gone through with cutting off his arm and survived, most likely. But if he had been a couple of seconds too late...

'Better not to think about.'

Anyway, he was glad that the Blood Arrow was on their side now.

Not too far away from him, gliding through the air, Kai suddenly made a strange gasping sound. Sunny didn't know what it felt like to have your blood magically drained and then suddenly returned to your body, but he doubted that it was pleasant.

Also, there was this question... if Kai's blood was used to create the arrow and then returned to him — if he had hit his mark, of course — then... where did the blood drained from the prey went?

He wasn't sure that he wanted to know.

In any case, with Nightingale in possession of the morbid Ascended Memory, their battles with iron spiders and other inhabitants of the Labyrinth became a bit less perilous. The Blood Arrow did not have any enchantments that needed to be activated by manipulating soul essence, so the charming archer could use it to its full potential.

Although Sunny was still a bit bitter about having to give such a menacing weapon away, he was now more confident than ever that his decision was the right one.

...Just like that, six more days passed by. During this time, he didn't gain any new Memories, but managed to accumulate eighteen more shadow fragments, bringing his total to three hundred and forty. He was still not as strong physically as he had been before creating the Shadow Saint, but getting closer and closer.

In the evening of the sixth day, bloodied and exhausted, the cohort had finally approached the goal of the first leg of their expedition.

Looking at it, Sunny couldn't help but stop in his tracks.

His eyes slightly widened.

'Of course...'

Chapter 221: Zenith | Shadow Slave

In front of them, the ground was shattered, creating a titanic fracture. The canyon was so deep and vast that Sunny had to strain his eyes to see the other side of it. Crimson coral clung to its walls, spilling over the edge like a torrent of blood.

A long time ago, a graceful bridge of white stone connected the two sides of the canyon together. Now, however, it was broken, with only its base remaining in place.

Looking at the bridge, Sunny realized that there must have been an ancient road somewhere beneath their feet. It led directly to the main gates of the ancient city, moving across the colossal canyon by means of the miraculous bridge and passing beneath the grandiose arch of white marble.

Come to think of it, the headless knight, the Ashen Barrow, and the graceful woman whose hands had saved him twice were also situated in a straight line. Perhaps there was another road leading east, too.

However, this thought disappeared from his head as quickly as it had appeared. All his attention was drawn to the remnants of the stone bridge, where...

Stood another giant statue.

Right above the weathered ruins stood a colossal stone warrior. He was clad in an archaic cuirass, with a beautiful spear resting on his shoulder. The warrior was facing south, as though greeting the travelers who traveled on the road to reach the ancient city.

...Of course, his head was missing.

More than that, the whole statue was covered in vast sheets of dull grey spiderweb, as if dressed in a solemn burial shroud. Sunny shivered, afraid to imagine what kind of creature was capable of creating the thick metal cables of the web that encompassed the stone colossus.

Noticing his expression, Effie smiled.

"Scary, huh?"

Sunny gave her a nod, hoping against all hope that they would not have to find out the answer to his question.

For once, his hopes were not shattered to pieces.

The vivacious huntress sighed.

"I haven't seen it myself, but I heard stories of the creature that used to make its nest here. It was the mother of all these damnable spiders we've been dealing with for the past week. A huge menace of a Nightmare Creature, as big as a house and utterly deadly. Armored like a hover tank, too."

Sunny gulped and cast a sideways look at Nephis.

"What's a hover tank?"

Effie blinked a couple of times, then answered in an amused tone:

"Oh, right! You're a school dropout, I almost forgot. You've seen a PTV before, right? PTV stands for a "personal transport vehicle", as you know. I hope. Well, a tank is sort of like that, only much bigger and heavier, with thick armor and a kinetic or energy cannon installed on it. The government sometimes employs them to support Awakened when a Gate opens near populated areas."

Sunny tried to imagine such a vehicle and hazily remembered seeing something like this on the news when he was a kid. Mostly, these tanks Effie had described were shown opened like tin cans, with their crews pulled out and eaten by attacking monsters.

He shivered. Mundane people had no business fighting against Nightmare Creatures.

To be completely honest, even Awakened were had no business facing them. It's just that they had no other choice.

"...We're not going to try and kill that big spider, are we?"

Effie laughed.

"Actually, it's you lucky day. We won't be meeting the Spider Mommy. In fact, no one ever will. She's long dead."

Sunny sighed with relief and glanced at the huntress:

"Yeah, great. But how do you know?"

She shrugged.

"She was killed by the second ruler of the Bright Castle — before he went and got himself killed trying to conquer the Crimson Spire. The huntress who showed me the ropes when I arrived on the Forgotten Shore had actually been one of the members of his cohort once, if you can believe it. In fact, she was the one who dealt the finishing blow to that abomination."

Effie looked at the giant mass of spiderwebs and shook her head.

"It must have been one hell of a battle, huh? Anyway, I'm glad that she did. That's how she received the Zenith Shard, which I then inherited."

Sunny frowned.

"What exactly are you talking about?"

The huntress leaned on her beautiful bronze spear and patted its shaft.

"My spear. It's a tier-five Awakened Memory, so the big bad spider was an awakened tyrant, I guess. Can you imagine? All these creepy crawlers serving a sentient commander. Thank gods it's dead."

Sunny looked at her with a dubious expression.

"Why would that mentor of your gave away such a treasure?"

Effie was silent for a few moments, then smiled.

"Ah, we were kind of close. Plus, she had no idea how to use a spear. Sorcerers, am I right? In any case, she gave the Zenith Shard to me."

Despite her carefree tone, he could tell that that smile was fake. Effie did not let it show, but Sunny could tell that the death of this huntress whose name he didn't even know had met affected her more than she was telling.

Who knows. Since Effie's original cohort had perished in the catacombs, their corpses might still be somewhere there, in those cursed tunnels.

However, something else was on his mind.

Sunny furrowed his brow. Midnight Shard, Zenith Shard. Was there a connection? He didn't know.

There might have been. He had received the Midnight Shard from Nephis, who had gotten it after killing the Carapace Demon.

The Demon, even though it had been enthralled by the Soul Devourer, appeared as the leader of the Nightmare Creature in that region of the Labyrinth... just like the brood mother of the iron spiders had been.

Two headless statues, two powerful abominations, two Memories with similar names. Wasn't it a little bit too much to be a coincidence?

Glancing at Effie, he asked:

"Was your spear forged from a shard of a fallen star, by chance?"

Just as he said it, Cassie slightly turned her head, listening to their conversation. That small detail told Sunny everything he wanted to know.

The huntress raised her eyebrows.

"It was, at least according to its description. Who told you?"

A corner of Sunny's lips slightly curled upward.

"No one. I just guessed."

With that, he left Effie alone and walked forward.

It seemed as though he was right. There was some hidden meaning behind the names of these two Memories. Cassie seemed to know something about it, and that meant that Nephis did, too.

And yet, they chose to keep it from Sunny and the rest of the cohort.

He sighed.

'So this expedition is not as simple as it seems.'

Not that it ever seemed particularly simple, to begin with.

He had guessed a long time ago that Changing Star had some hidden motive to want to leave the Dark City, but now, his suspicions were as good as confirmed.

The smile disappeared from Sunny's face.

He didn't like being kept in the dark at all.

'Kept in the dark, huh. Oh, the irony...'

At that moment, his shadow reached the base of the giant statue. With a deep frown, Sunny summoned the Midnight Shard and glanced at Nephis, putting all needless thought aside.

"There's a nest ahead. We will have to destroy it to access the statue. Lots of spiders... some bigger ones, too."

She gave him a nod and turned to face the others.

"We need to clear the nest and climb the statue before the sun sets. Prepare for battle..."

Chapter 222: Clearing the Nest

A clear and melodic sound of a ringing bell reverberated through the air above the Labyrinth, alerting the monstrous spiders hiding in the enormous cocoon of grey webs that a new prey came knocking on their door.

Moments later, swift bodies clad in heavy plates of iron armor shot from beneath the grey spiderweb, moving through the steel wires with terrifying speed. There were enough Nightmare Creatures in that wave to obliterate anything that stood in their way... seemingly.

However, what stood in their way were two figures — one tall and boisterous, the other one on the shorter side and radiating a strange feeling of indifferent firmness.

They were Effie and the Stone Saint. Both held their shields raised, the tips of their weapons resting on their edges. As the huntress grinned, the Shadow silently struck the rim of her shield with the blade of her sword twice.

As if answering that call, a vicious black arrow suddenly appeared from somewhere above, hitting the leading spider right in one of its many eyes. The monster's legs buckled, and it fell to the ground, forcing those creatures that followed behind to either dash around or jump over the massive body.

A fraction of a second later, the wave of spiders crashed into the small shield wall. A deafening roar of iron striking against iron resounded under the grey skies of the Forgotten Shore like a thunderclap. Despite the furious force of the assault, Effie and the Stone Saint somehow held — at least for now.

As soon as the momentum of the iron spiders was slowed down a little, Nephis and Caster appeared out of nowhere and attacked the mass of repulsive creatures from the sides. At the same time, a stonelike sword and a beautiful bronze spear lashed out from behind the shields.

Black blood splashed into the air.

Meanwhile, Sunny softly landed on the ground behind the Nightmare Creatures and stealthily moved through the shadows, swiftly approaching them from the back. The Midnight Shard flashed, sending one of the spiders into the embrace of death.

[You have slain an awakened beast...]

Without listening to the Spell, Sunny used the precious moments before the enemy noticed his presence to wreck as much havoc as possible. His tachi moved twice more, severing several limbs and heavily wounding another abomination. After that, the spiders finally reacted to his treacherous attack...

'Not treacherous... just... smart!'

With Effie and the Stone Saint holding the front, Nephis and Caster attacking from the sides, and Sunny closing the trap from behind, the monstrous arachnids were now surrounded from all sides.

...Well, sort of.

Of course, a small group of dormant humans could never hope to truly surround this many superior Nightmare Creatures, not even with the help of a monster of their own. Trapped or not, as soon as the iron spiders had the time to react, they could easily overwhelm and tear them to pieces.

Especially Sunny, who was behind the line these vicious creatures and all alone. If the spiders decided to shift the focus of their attack, he would be dead in seconds.

As another black arrow hit one of the larger spiders in the abdomen, Sunny hissed and dove under a spider scythe, then thrust his sword forward, ruthlessly piercing the head of the beast through its open, salivating mouth.

[You have...]

With no time to tear the Midnight Shard from the spider's corps, Sunny let go of its hilt and jumped back, narrowly avoiding being crushed by another ironclad creature.

The few seconds of the advantage they had were coming to an end. A moment or two later, the spiders were bound to come to their senses. Even though the cohort had managed to kill ten or so in this short window of time, there were still enough of the deadly creatures to rip them to shreds.

Sunny didn't even have to look at Nephis to feel the shift in her movements. The silent understanding the two of them developed during their journey through the Labyrinth many months ago was still there, allowing them to cooperate perfectly without the need to use any words, as though they were two parts of the same whole.

In fact, despite the rift in their relationship, this bond was stronger than ever.

Perhaps because they understood each other so much better now... for better or for worse.

Ah, it was so exhilarating to fight side by side with Changing Star once again...

Just before the spiders were able to turn the tide of the battle in their favor, Effie and the Stone Saint — who was following Sunny's command — suddenly moved to the sides.

Nephis, Caster, and Sunny braced themselves.

Behind the improvised shield wall stood Cassie. She was holding a wooden staff in her hands, while an elegant rapier hovered in the air above her shoulder.

The tip of the rapier pointed directly at the spiders. As though following the direction of the Quiet Dancer's blade, Cassie moved her staff and activated its enchantment.

Immediately, a powerful gust of hurricane wind slammed into the mass of the Nightmare Creatures, sending several of them reeling and throwing clouds of dust into the air. Of course, it wasn't strong enough to truly throw these abominations off their balance or damage them in any way.

However, that wasn't the plan.

Spider kin of these creatures back on Earth had a uniquely powerful sense of hearing. Which was rather strange, considering that they had no organs that resembled ears at all. The truth of the matter was that spiders were able to feel the vibrations of sound waves.

They were also masterful architects, using the vibrations in the specially created threads weaved into their webs to sense the movements of their prey from afar.

These Nightmare Creatures were much the same. As the powerful wind threw dust into the air and made every wire of every surrounding spiderweb vibrate all at once, they were momentarily disoriented.

The members of the cohort were waiting for this exact moment. Instantly, they attacked with ferocious determination, spilling rivers of viscous black blood onto the ground. Sunny himself had already gotten his austere sword back, and now used its razor-sharp blade to gut the beast that had forced him to retreat a couple of seconds ago.

[You have slain...]

By the time the iron spiders came back to their senses, their numbers were significantly diminished.

...But there were still so many of them.

After that, the battlefield became consumed with chaos. There was no time for plans or tactics anymore. Every member of the cohort had to face off against multiple opponents, fighting with desperate resolve against enemies that surpassed them both in terms of personal power and numbers.

Only the Stone Saint was calm and indifferent, moving through the ranks of the iron spiders like a graceful incarnation of pure darkness.

The battle fell apart into several small pockets of fearsome violence. Kai was trying to support his companions from above, but with how intense the fighting got, he was having trouble finding the opportunities to take shots without risking hitting them.

He was too afraid to take a risk, knowing all too well how harrowing the effects of the Blood Arrow were. If even the Nightmare Creatures of higher rank were doomed to succumb to a torturous death after being wounded by the ghastly Memory, humans like them had no chance of surviving.

For now, people on the ground were on their own.

...Sunny was struggling against two ironclad abominations, gritting his teeth in exasperation. The damn bastards were too fast to reliably hit them in the gaps in armor and too damn powerful to face them directly. As the result, he was forced to constantly dance between the two of them, dodging the whirlwind of strikes that rained on him from all sides.

"Curses!"

Jumping back, he held the Midnight Shard with one hand and used another to throw the Prowling Thorn in the direction of one of the spiders. The creature easily dodged the kunai and continued its attack, threatening to slice Sunny's hand clean off.

He had no choice but to retreat once again.

...Behind the menacing beast, the throwing dagger continued to spin. A few moments later, it cut a smooth arch in the air and flew back, as if turning into a boomerang.

Sadly, just like the spiders back on Earth, these repulsive creatures had an almost absolute field of vision. The second spider simply moved its head down at the last moment without even bothering to turn it, dodging the heavy kunai that approached it from behind.

But Sunny was never trying to wound the Nightmare Creatures with the Prowling Thorn, to begin with. Instead, he wanted to let them taste their own medicine.

A moment later, the invisible string of his kunai drew taut, wrapped around two massive bodies. Just like prey used to be caught in their webs, the iron spiders were now caught by the invisible string of the Prowling Thorn, tripping over it and crashing into each other.

Sunny dashed forward and let the Midnight Shard sing. The graceful blade flashed twice, sending two ugly spider heads spinning into the air.

[You have slain an awakened beast, Iron Spider.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Kicking one of the heads away, Sunny swiftly glanced around, searching for a new enemy.

But there were none.

[...You have slain an awakened beast, Iron Spider.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

[You have received a Memory.]

The gargantuan cocoon of steel spiderwebs was empty. Corpses of its previous inhabitants littered the ground, oozing with black blood.

The cohort had cleared the entire nest full of Awakened abominations.

No matter how incredible, this was the undeniable truth.

They had won.

Chapter 223: Natural Selection | Shadow Slave

The danger was gone, so Sunny allowed himself to tiredly kneel on the ground, his breathing heavy and laborious. The strenuous battle against the host of spiders had not lasted long, but he was utterly exhausted. The intensity of these perilous minutes was enough to bring anyone down to their knees.

'Too weak. I am still too weak.'

With a heavy sigh, he summoned the runes and glanced at the number of shadow fragments.

Shadow Fragments: [362/1000].

Not bad. Clearing the nest had given him twenty-two fragments — ten for the five iron spiders he had killed himself, and another twelve for those slain by the Shadow Saint.

With the taciturn monster serving as his murderous pet, the speed with which Sunny was able to accumulate power was twice as fast, at least. If things continued like this, the Stone Saint was going to return his investment of a hundred shadow fragments in no time.

'If I live long enough.'

With a grimace, Sunny dismissed the Midnight Shard and slowly got up. The sun was already rolling down toward the horizon, so they had to hurry with collecting soul shards from the corpses of the iron spiders.

There were a lot of corpses...

Cutting one of the beasts open with the Prowling Thorn, Sunny struggled with the idea that they had eviscerated this many Nightmare Creatures. Of course, he had expected this much. After all, Nephis and Sunny had been able to fight against two or three carapace scavengers back when it was

only the two of them. Both of them were much weaker, less experienced, and barely equipped with Memories back then, too.

Now that they had spent seven whole months in the Dream Realm — many times more than most Sleepers ever had to — and tempered themselves against the perilous hellscape of the Forgotten Shore, both their skill and level of power had dramatically increased.

Add the fact that there were two other powerhouses fighting alongside them, as well as Nightingale and the menacing Stone Saint, and the outcome of the battle ceased to be that surprising.

And yet, observing the carnage that they had left if their wake still made Sunny doubt his eyes.

These were Awakened Nightmare Creatures, still.

The real reason why the cohort had won did not lie in the individual prowess of its members, but in their ability to cooperate and control the battlefield. The iron spiders were powerful and deadly, but at the end of the day, they were still mindless beasts. That's why they had allowed themselves to be surrounded and trapped.

Had they been commanded by a creature of a higher Class, one that was as cunning and smart as the humans it faced, things would have turned out very differently.

Sunny sighed.

Come to think of it, the Labyrinth was a curious place. It teemed with abominable creatures of all kinds, but almost all of them were of the mindless variety. The only two exceptions he knew about were the Carapace Demon and the Spider Matriarch, who had been either a devil or a tyrant.

ρ□□□□ □□□□□ Perhaps it was just the nature of this place. Nothing too big and strong could escape from the flood of black water that drowned the world every night. Only comparatively small monsters were able to run

away or hide — both from the dark sea itself and from the hungry terrors that inhabited it.

These monsters were an almost insurmountable threat to those unfortunate young people who were sent to this forsaken hell by the Spell, but by the standards of the Forgotten Shore itself, they were nothing but insects.

A horde of parasites who fed on the crumbs left behind by the true masters of this place. pa□□a □□□□□

'What a depressing thought.'

This notion poured cold water on Sunny's pride over their achievement.

'Well. Whatever...'

Soon, they were done with the gruesome job of fishing out the soul shards out of the dead spiders. While Nephis was dividing the spoils among the members of the cohort, Sunny used the chance to dive into his Soul Sea and inspect the Memory he had received during the battle.

It turned out to be a cloak weaved from spider silk. Judging from the description, the cloak could provide him with a small amount of protection against physical attacks, simple by virtue of being very hard to piece.

Without thinking too much, Sunny fed the cloak to the Stone Saint. It was just a tier-one Memory, so no amount of protection it could provide would be of any help in this damned place. He would also rather kill himself than go into a battle while wearing a cloak. There were easier and less painful ways to die.

Plus, it was white. Didn't exactly go along with the dark grey fabric of the Puppeteer's Shard, not to mention being a hindrance to anything having to do with stealth.

The Stone Saint absorbed another shadow fragment, at least.

Receiving his share of the soul shards and entrusting them to Effie, who had more than enough space in her enchanted bag, Sunny glanced at Nephis.

Changing Star was looking at the sun, calculating something in her head. After a few moments, she sighed and said:

"We still have some time. Let's explore the nest before ascending the statue."

Sunny grinned.

As an amateur explorer, this was exactly what he wanted to hear.

The nest was formed by endless wires of the strange metal web and resembled a vast sphere. It was built around one of the legs of the stone colossus, effectively blocking the path to the bridge.

The entrance was situated high above the ground, and extremely wide. Looking at the diameter of that hole gave Sunny an understanding of just how big the Spider Matriarch had been.

He shivered. The second lord of the Castle had been a very powerful individual. Sunny didn't even want to imagine what the battle with the giant arachnid must have looked like.

Inside, it was dark and damp. Drops of black water were falling from above, creating an ominous melody.

Peering into the darkness, Sunny suddenly stumbled and froze for a moment.

This... he didn't expect.

Chapter 224: Pyre | Shadow Slave

Inside the giant nest of spiderwebs, a desiccated corpse of the colossal Matriarch lay shriveled on the floor, its iron carapace shattered by some devastating blow. The creature was long dead, but the sight of it was still terrifying.

The vast abdomen of the brood mother, however, appeared to have been severed much later than her fatal battle against the Lord of the Bright Castle. It almost looked as if it was... torn apart from within. Inside the terrifying wound, Sunny noticed the shattered remnants of five giant, metallic eggs.

The size of them was about the same as that of the five monstrous Fallen Beasts that had destroyed the original Stone Saint and her brethren back in the Dark City.

'So... that was where they came from.'

Looking away with a shiver, Sunny noticed numerous cocoons of spiderwebs attached to the walls of the nest all around the dead Matriarch. Inside them, withered carcasses of Nightmare Creatures of all shapes and sizes were preserved in a strangely good condition.

This was a true museum of terror.

The Nightmare Creatures appeared as though they were kept alive inside the cocoons for a long, long time before finally succumbing to death and turning into mummified corpses. Perhaps the abominable spiders stored them there for later consumption.

Or... not.

Noticing a few cocoons that had been broken open and what was inside of them, Sunny had to try hard to stop himself from vomiting.

The iron spiders did not use the monsters caught in the cocoons for food.

...They used them as incubators.

The creatures in the broken cocoons had been devoured from within. A few of them still had hundreds of small, moist eggs embedded into their flesh, with embryonic spiderlings moving weakly behind the slightly transparent shells.

'Curse... it all...'

Damn these spiders, damn the Labyrinth, damn the Forgotten Shore... and especially damn the damned Nightmare Spell that had brought him here. Sunny suddenly felt tired of this long, feverish, neverending nightmare he had found himself in.

But the worse was still to come.

He was the first to notice it. With a dark grimace suddenly appearing on his face, Sunny called out to his companions. Then, he led them deeper into the nest, where, attached to the wall, hung a cocoon that was different from all the others.

Because this one hid a rough silhouette of a human body.

The six of them stood somberly around the cocoon, each consumed by their own dark thoughts. Finally, Nephis turned her head to Caster and said:

"Can you sword cut it open?"

With a short nod, the proud Legacy summoned the enchanted jian and took a step forward. Approaching the cocoon, he stopped and hesitated for a few moments.

"Be careful."

Glancing back at Changing Star, Caster lingered for a second, and then faced the cocoon with grim determination written on his face. As ghostly green light emanated from the blade of his sword, he swung it with the graceful precision of an expert swordsman.

The tip of the jian cut through the metal wires of the cocoon, splitting it open. A shriveled human body fell to the floor, making the Legacy jump back.

Nephis, Caster, and Sunny stared at it, their faces pale and full of ghastly resentment. Then, Sunny bent over and emptied the contents of his stomach.

...This was just too much.

The young man whose corpse they found in this harrowing place did not die an easy death. In fact, being eaten alive from the inside by a hundred of tiny Nightmare Creatures was probably the worst fate imaginable. At least Sunny couldn't think of anything worse.

But even worse still, he recognized the dead Sleeper.

His face was strangely intact, with an expression of horrifying agony frozen on it forever. Despite the overall condition of the corpse, Sunny knew who it was just from one look. ~~pa a~~

It was the young man who had attended the Academy with them, the one who had called him a shorty when Sunny first approached Caster to create the impression that he was a boastful lunatic.

Looking at their condition, Effie frowned:

"Did you guys know him?"

After a few moments of silence, Caster slowly nodded.

"Yes. His name is... his name was Stephen. He was the youngest heir of the Pandavar clan.

'Stephen...'

Sunny had not even bothered to learn the name of this arrogant young man back when they were preparing to venture into the Dream Realm at the Academy. In fact, he had really disliked him, and for a good reason.

ρ□□□□ □□□□□ But looking at the hideous, terrifying corpse in front of him, he had forgotten all about it. Sunny would never wish this fate on anyone, let alone one of his fellow students.

Slowly, a solemn mood took overtook the cohort. They had already known that the other three Sleepers sent to the Forgotten Shore this year never made it to the Dark City, which meant that they had perished somewhere in the Labyrinth. However, finding one of them served as a stark reminder of how fragile their own lives were.

Who knew what would happen to them in the future? If not today, death could be waiting for them tomorrow. Perhaps years from now, it would be their corpses that someone would stumble upon by accident.

Some time later, Nephis gritted her teeth and turned away. Then, she said, her voice suppressed and hollow:

"We need to leave. The sun is setting."

Her words broke the silence and brought everyone back from their grim reveries. Caster lingered for a few minutes, then spoke in a hesitant tone:

"Aren't we... aren't we going to bury him?"

Changing Star shook her head.

"There's not enough time. I also don't want anyone touching the bodies infected with these eggs. It's too dangerous."

The members of the cohort looked at each other. No one had a reasonable objection, but it felt wrong to just leave their fellow human here.

Finally, Nephis sighed. A complicated expression appeared on her face, and then she said:

"...Alright. Go. I'll catch up with you guys later."

Sunny stared at her for a few moments, and then slowly turned away. One after another, the five of them glanced at Changing Star and left, leaving her

alone with the dead young man and numerous cocoons, each hiding a slain Nightmare Creatures.

As soon as the last member of the cohort climbed out of the nest, a beam of pure radiance suddenly shot from the dark hole of its entrance, followed by a wave of scorching heat. The purifying fire unleashed by Changing Star engulfed the remains of their fellow student and then spread to the numerous cocoons, the Nightmare Creatures inside of them, and even the corpse of the Spider Matriarch herself.

The insides of the nest turned into an incandescent, incinerating furnace. Everything inside of it was doomed to be annihilated and turn to ashes.

A few minutes later, the whole structure was consumed by furious white flames.

Nephis had escaped the burning nest shortly after the rest of her cohort, her face pale and tired.

Leaving the grandiose funeral pyre behind, they began ascending the statue of the ancient warrior.

The night was approaching.

Chapter 225: On The Shoulders Of Giants

Once they climbed all the way to the broad shoulders of the statue and found a suitable place to make camp, everyone looked down without having to say anything.

Far below them, the giant nest was still aflame. The cables that constituted it were melting and turning into rivers of liquid metal, flowing down from the edges into the vast abyss of the canyon.

The turbulent black waters were rising from below to meet them. When the two streams met — one lightless, the other incandescent — billowing columns of hot vapor shot into the air. For a few moments, it seemed as though light and darkness were on equal footing.

But then the cursed sea rose from the depths of the canyon in a surge and washed away the brightness of melting iron away. The flood of blackness crashed into the burning nest, dousing it.

A minute or so later, the white flames were gone. The surface of the dark sea continued to rise, as though nothing had ever happened.

Sunny sighed and turned to Nephis.

Now that they had reached their goal, it was time to face the real danger. With a grim expression on his face, he asked:

"So... now what?"

He knew the general concept of how she was planning to reach the southern edges of the Forgotten Shore in a short time, but not the details.

Changing Star glanced at him, lingered for a moment, and then said:

"We arrived at the canyon faster than I expected. There are still two days left before we can act. So, make yourself at home. We'll rest tomorrow and start preparing for it the next day."

Sunny smiled.

Rest... that sounded swell.

Plus, he wasn't really looking forward to making use of the "fast and comparatively safe" method of traveling through the Labyrinth that Nephis had talked about.

In fact, he would rather never have to use it at all.

Just like that, the cohort found itself with nothing to do for the next two days. Before leaving the Dark City, Changing Star had anticipated that various things could slow them down and padded the schedule of the expedition with extra time.

Who knew that they would actually make it to the broken bridge so fast?

In any case, Sunny wasn't complaining. He had a lot to do and think about.

For example, the mysterious connection between his tachi, Effie's spear, and the headless statues that stood around the Forgotten Shore.

The statues represented the seven valiant heroes that had made an oath to return light to this cursed land thousands of years ago. Sunny had seen three of them by now: the knight, the graceful woman, and now this mighty warrior.

Did every statue have a connection with a specific Memory? If so, what was that connection and why was Nephis so reluctant to share this information with everyone? pa□□a □□□□□

Well... it wasn't like he and Changing Star were very close now. Sunny had drawn a clear line to denote the nature of their relationship himself. He insisted that he was not a true member of the cohort, but merely a hired specialist.

Why would she share her secret with him?

This was a logical conclusion, but Sunny couldn't help but feel a bit resentful.

Despite the fact that he was her first partner, now, the situation had changed. Nephis had other people to rely on... like Caster.

So why would she say that Sunny was the only person she trusted on the Forgotten Shore except for Cassie, and then hide her technique from Caster?

ρ□□□□ □□□□□ Everything felt so complicated.

In any case, there was an invisible line drawn between the core members of the hunting party and the outsiders — Sunny and Kai.

No one consciously avoided them, but it was clear that the line existed. When all was said and done, the four true members of the cohort preferred each other's company. That's why Sunny and Kai ended up spending a lot of time together, chatting about this and that and generally having a nice time.

Honestly, Sunny couldn't complain. As far as companions went, the charming archer was not the worst option.

Plus, their conversations were extremely entertaining.

Kai had a lot of fun stories about his life as a celebrity, while Sunny had plenty of macabre anecdotes about his life in the outskirts.

Their life experiences were so vastly different that it was almost as if they were from different worlds. As a result, both felt like they were listening to fictional stories about some strange and fantastical land that they had never heard about before.

Sunny spent the rest of his time training with the sword, trying to turn Shadow Dance from an ethereal concept into a practical set of core principles. The progress was painfully slow, but now there was progress, at least.

He was having so much trouble because his chosen battle style was so strange and elusive. Unlike most styles, which started with certain movements and steps, this one was supposed to imitate any movement and any step instead of introducing its own.

So it was more about the state of mind and the flexibility of his physical behavior. Sunny had to create a set of training exercises that would allow his body and muscle memory to become capable of adapting to any style and turn pliable like a shadow.

On the first day of trying, his whole body ached. Despite his incredible physical shape and experience with tough training, Sunny ended up straining the muscles that he didn't even know he had, and force those that he did know about to behave in a way that was utterly different from what they were used to.

Actually, his previous training was even detrimental to the whole process. He had to make himself unlearn a lot of things to allow for this strange style to take root in his very bones. Thankfully, the foundation of his technique was Changing Star's flowing style, which itself was designed for maximum adaptability.

If Sunny learned another style or was further into mastering any existing technique, this would have been ten times harder, if not impossible.

...Needless to say, his exercises were in no way similar to the beautiful and graceful dance he had seen in his dream. In fact, from the side, Sunny must have looked as though he was having a seizure. He caught more than one amused stare while practicing.

It didn't matter.

The only thing that mattered was that he was slowly pushing himself toward mastering the basics of Shadow Dance... and, hopefully, receiving his first Relic.

Chapter 226: The Fool | Shadow Slave

On the evening of the first of the two days that they had at their disposal, Sunny climbed all the way to the highest point of the statue and sat there alone, looking at the setting sun.

He felt as though he had to find a sense of balance that he had lost at some point along the way. Not because he missed it, but because he was going to need that balance to remain firm and steady when the moment of truth came.

If he was right about the future, then this was probably the last day of peace he would experience until this whole thing was over. Not only the expedition...

But all of it.

Looking back, his behavior in these past few months was highly erratic. Where were the cold rationality and ruthlessness that saved him so many times in the past? The caution and devious cunning that allowed him to survive the First Nightmare? He had not been acting like himself for a long time.

Yes, his mental state had suffered greatly because of everything that had happened. But was it the only reason?

Come to think of it...

The first blow dealt to him was the bitter revelation that there was no Gateway in the Bright Castle. After everything that Sunny had endured to make it to the Dark City, the crushing intensity of their journey through the Labyrinth, the diabolical trap of the Soul Devourer and their escape from it, the cold and harrowing night of traversing the dark sea... all of it turned out to have been for nothing.

Not only were they not rewarded for their efforts, but all of their hopes were mercilessly destroyed and obliterated instead.

This alone was enough to drive a person mad.

Then came the feeling of alienation he felt while living with Nephis, Cassie, and all the newcomers in the outer settlement. Instead of finding support and solace in the company of his friends, Sunny fell into his old habit. Unconsciously, he turned himself into an outcast to prevent anyone from making him one.

This was the most noticeable, but not the only instance of him regressing to his old self. After fighting so hard to change and grow, Sunny ended up abandoning most of the lessons he had learned after becoming infected by the Nightmare Spell.

He was almost like an addict relapsing after a few days of sobriety and giving up completely because of this one small mistake.

But who could blame him?

Sunny was already shaking under the pressure of the situation. One little push, and he would fall under its weight.

In the end, it was not one, but three blows that shattered him completely. As though the world wanted to make sure that he was truly broken.

First was the terrible epiphany of what Cassie's vision really meant. Almost instantly after that, while Sunny was still reeling, came the fatal mistake in the conversation with Harper and the brutal murder that followed. And if that was not enough, the person he relied on the most to keep his sanity in this cursed place, Nephis, made it impossible for him to trust her any longer.

Anyone would have collapsed under that weight. And yet Sunny managed to keep his balance, even if just barely.

The final straw that finally broke him was the excruciating, neverending sea of torturous pain he suffered after being mortally wounded by the Black Knight.

After that, Sunny had relinquished all pretense of having control.

And now here he was. Playing the fool, acting like a fool, and fooling around with Kai and Effie. Wasn't it fun? Wasn't it easy?

Yes, his mental state wasn't great.

But it was also very convenient to blame everything on this condition. The truth of it...

The truth of it was that Sunny did not try to reign himself in at all. In fact, he welcomed this madness. Being a bit crazy was comforting, simple, and safe.pa□□a □□□□□

It protected him from having to look at the heartbreaking truth and remember it. Sunny needed the shield of madness to save himself from the bottomless despair that threatened to destroy him completely.

So what if he was prone to act recklessly in this state? So what if he made mistakes here and there and took unnecessary risks? Anything was better than having to face that despair.

Just like Nephis had said, one had to become a little insane to survive in the world that had gone mad.

...And yet, Sunny knew that what he was doing was nothing but hiding his head in the sand.

And now that the end was approaching, he had to stop hiding from the truth. He had to admit and endure it.

This was the only way for him to survive.

...As the sun disappeared behind the horizon and the absolute darkness drowned the Forgotten Shore, he sighed deeply and whispered:

"Alright. Alright. It's time to wake up."

The next day, six humans were standing at the edge of the vast canyon as the twilight of dusk drowned the world in shadows. Far below them, the black waters of the cursed sea were raging, rising from the depths in a terrifying, obliterating wave.

In a few minutes, all light was going to be completely gone. And then, the flood of darkness would wash over the world, destroying anyone left standing in its path.

...And yet, the humans were not rushing to get away. Instead, they just stood there and waited.

Looking down into the canyon, Sunny gritted his teeth and shivered. Then, he glanced at Nephis and licked his dry lips.

"Are you sure about this?"

Changing Star did not spare him a look and simply nodded. Despite the fact that the rising black water was quickly approaching them, her face was calm and composed.

A moment later, the last vestiges of sunlight disappeared, leaving them in utter darkness. The silence that surrounded them was broken only by the sound of waves rushing against the walls of the canyon.

Getting closer and closer.

ρ□□□□ □□□□□ "Prepare yourselves."

Sunny sighed.

'Here we go.'

Suddenly, a blinding burst of white light pierced the darkness. Holding the incandescent sword in her hand, Nephis closed her shining eyes for a second...

And then raised the sword high above her head, as if calling the monsters of the depths to come take her.

Chapter 227: Comparatively Safe | Shadow Slave

The embrace of impenetrable darkness was broken by the furious white light of Changing Star's incandescent sword. Illuminated by it, six people were standing on the shore of a raging river. Their faces were pale and grim.

The canyon had disappeared, consumed by the rising surge of the black water. Now, the cursed sea was flowing over its edges, ready to swell and flood the narrow passages of the great Labyrinth in an unstoppable wave.

Sunny felt cold water wash over his feet and shivered. The rest of the cohort reacted exactly the same — even Kai, who could escape into the lightless skies at any moment, seemed to be deeply unnerved by the closeness of the encroaching sea.

Among the six of them, only three had truly experienced the perils of this dark abyss. They knew that the real dread came not from the sea itself, but from the terrors that hid in its cursed depths.

Like the host of the of whispering voices that they had heard beneath the branches of the Soul Tree.

Or the gargantuan creature that had almost cost Nephis her life.

However, Sunny was not going to make a remark to educate the rest of the cohort. After all, what they were trying to do right now was to summon one of these terrors from below.

One that was different from all the others.

"Sunny?"

Peering into the darkness, he lingered.

"I don't see anything... yet."

The water was already to his shins and rising swiftly. Sunny grimaced and struggled with the desire to turn around and run away without looking back.

If he was fast enough... if he was lucky enough... he could still make it to the giant statue before the torrent of darkness drowned him under its crushing weight.

Instead, Sunny glanced at Nephis and Cassie.

The blind girl had glimpsed this secret of the Forgotten Shore in her visions and shared it with Changing Star. Changing Star had devised a plan to make use of it.

Both of them were confident that they were going to succeed. So, he was going to be confident, too.

Sunny didn't fully trust either of his former companions, not anymore. But he trusted their judgment.

...Just as that thought appeared in his mind, there was a subtle movement at the edges of his vision. Turning his head, Sunny stared into the darkness... and trembled.

"...It's here."

Out there in the distance, a massive shape was moving through the waves, attracted by the light of Changing Star's incandescent blade. The sea seethed and swirled around it, the black mass of water easily pushed away by the approaching creature.

Nephis gritted her teeth and somehow made her flames burn even brighter, forcing the darkness to retreat another dozen steps.

"Get ready!"

A few moments later, the furious sounds of a massive body moving through the dark water reached their ears. The creature was a true giant, easily towering above the waves even though it was walking on the bottom of the canyon.

...Well, no surprise.

Full of terror and awe, Sunny watched as the thing they were waiting for came closer. Soon, he could discern the general shape of it.

Two hills that rose above water were its shoulders. And right between them, where the head should have been...

There was nothing but emptiness.

There were seven headless statues on the Forgotten Shore, but only six marks on the map created by Nephis. Not because she had failed to learn of the seventh one...

But because the seventh statue never stayed in one place for too long.

And now, that stone colossus was walking through the flooded canyon, his shoulder scraping against one of its walls. The wide chest of the headless giant pushed the water away, creating whirlpools in his wake.

Raising one colossal arm, the statue easily destroyed the protruding remnants of the ancient bridge that got in its way. The debris rained into the black waves, disappearing into them without a trace.

This... this was their fast and safe — comparatively — method of traveling to the edges of the Forgotten Shore.

'Truly insane,' Sunny thought, stunned by the sheer scale of everything that was happening.

Come to think of it, it was really ironic. The next day after he had decided to return to some semblance of sanity, something this crazy was about to transpire.

It was as though the whole world was mocking him.

Shaking his head, Sunny turned to the cohort and yelled:

"He's coming!"

The black water was already to their knees. The members of the cohort tensed and prepared themselves for what was about to come.

They only had one chance to do this. Failure meant death.

A few moments later, the massive shape of the stone colossus entered the circle of light created by Nephis. Its shoulders rose above the waves, close enough to the now invisible shore of the flooded canyon for them to see every tiny crack on the surface of the weathered stone.

Now wasting any time, Changing Star ran forward and jumped. A moment later, the blade of her sword hit the surface of the statue and slid deep into it, as if melting the ancient stone. Using the sword as purchase, Nephis started to climb to the giant's shoulder.

The other members of the cohort were following closely behind her. Kai was carrying Cassie in his arms, flying to the top of the colossus with no problem at all. Caster seemed to simply disappear and appear a moment later on the giant's shoulder, standing side by side with Changing Star.

...Only Sunny was having trouble. With him not being very tall and the water level rising with each second, he found it hard to gain enough momentum for a proper jump.

'Damn... how irritating...'

However, before he could come up with a solution, Effie simply grabbed him by the collar... and tossed Sunny into the air.

'W—what?!'

For a few short moments, Sunny was flying. All he could hear was wind whistling in his ears.

Then, he landed on top of the giant statue, rolled, and barely prevented himself from falling back into the cold embrace of the dark sea. Before he could even stand up, the mighty huntress landed near him and grinned.

"Such a light..."

However, before she could finish the phrase, the stone colossus moved, making everyone stumble and fall.

Leaving the ruins of the bridge behind, he turned around and indifferently began walking away from it.

He was walking south.

Chapter 228: Crossing the Canyon

The stone colossus wandered the Forgotten Shore aimlessly for thousands of years. Cassie did not know what power had brought him to life, nor what he was searching for in the depths of the dark sea.

She had seen a vision of the headless giant passing the ruins of the ancient bridge on a certain day and then traveling south to the very edges of this desolate land. She also knew that the leader of the cohort that had conquered the Bright Castle pursued the seventh statue across the Labyrinth for a long time before leaving on his doomed journey.

His reasons for doing so were, presumably, unknown.

Sunny wasn't sure that the blind girl had told him the whole truth about the wandering colossus. In fact, he was certain that there was a deeper layer of secrets surrounding the seven ancient statues and their importance to the riddle of the Forgotten Shore.

However, he was in no hurry to hunt these secrets down. Sunny knew that all three of them — Nephis, Cassie, and himself — were bound together to this cursed place. The strings of fate were wrapped around them tightly, stretching far into the future, where the final revelations waited. He was going to learn the truth sooner or later.

Until then, Sunny was content knowing no more than he needed to know.

...The stone giant walked across the dark sea, cutting its surface with his wide chest. The six humans were gathered on the circular platform of his severed neck, pressing themselves against the swaying stone. The cold water was spraying into their faces and the furious winds were threatening to throw them off the moving statue into the deadly waves below.

Nephis had long extinguished her flames, so they were surrounded by absolute darkness. Sunny was the only one who could see what was happening around them, so his role was to serve as the eyes of the cohort.

Using the strength of the shadow to hold onto the slippery stones, he looked forward with a grim expression on his face.

Currently, there was only one thought on his mind.

Were they going to make it in time?

The colossus was swiftly approaching the other side of the canyon. Sunny could identify it by the remnants of the ancient bridge that were still above the turbulent black waves. However, the water level was rising much faster.

"Sunny?!"

Looking toward Effie, who called out his name, he lingered for a few moments and then yelled:

"Prepare yourself! We're going to be underwater for a couple of minutes, at least!"

A chorus of curses served as the answer.

Unseen by anyone, Sunny smiled darkly.

This was going to be his second time diving into the dark sea. Wasn't this how Gunlaug had begun his journey to the throne of the Dark City?

Maybe Sunny would be a king himself, one day.

"...Now!"

The black water rose higher and higher. The shoulders of the giant were already submerged in its lightless depths. The circular platform was going to be next.

They were so close to the shore...

As the stone colossus moved across the bottom of the canyon, the platform rose and fell. After another fall, it was finally lost beneath the waves.

The cold, salty water crashed into them and then swallowed the entire world. The members of the cohort desperately held onto the cracks in the stone, trying to prevent themselves from being washed away by the raging current.

No one would be able to save them if they were.

Sunny closed his eyes, knowing that he would not be able to see anything through the impenetrable darkness of the cursed sea. Instead, he relied on his Shadow Sense, hoping that it was going to help him feel if something approached them from the depths.

Now, all Sunny had to do was hold tight and hope that the headless giant would reach the shore of the canyon before he ran out of breath.

Thankfully, everyone present was strong and powerful. Their physical form was either at the pinnacle of human ability or slightly above it. Several minutes underwater were not going to kill them... most likely.

Placating himself with this thought, Sunny waited, and waited, and waited, struggling against the terrible current with all his strength. At some point, he thought that he sensed an unclear shape swim close to the walking statue, but then the sensation disappeared.

'Any second now... any second...'

But the relief he was so desperately waiting for was not coming for far longer than Sunny had expected. Soon, his lungs began to burn, and his muscles began to spasm.

'Damnation...'

If he was having trouble, then others must have been in far worse shape. After all, oxygen traveled through human bodies with blood, and their blood had not been altered and comprehensively enhanced by the forbidden legacy of the mysterious Weaver.

Just as he thought so, Sunny felt one of the six shadows slipping from the circular platform.

It was Kai...

'Crap!'

Fortunately, before the colossus plunged into the dark depths, the charming archer had been worried about Cassie and tied himself to her with the help of the golden rope. Surprisingly, the blind girl turned out to be more resilient than him in the end. Now, she was holding both of their weights, desperately grabbing onto a narrow crack in the ancient stone.

Kai's unconscious body was floating a few meters behind her. He was safe, for now.

But how long would Cassie herself be able to hold on?

...When Sunny felt his mind weakening, his body was suddenly slammed into the platform with tremendous force.

The stone giant was climbing out of the canyon. His massive hands grabbed onto the edge of it, and with one devastating pull, the colossus threw himself upward.

'Ugh... curse it!'

Sunny felt as though he was aboard the worst amusement ride in human history. His bones groaned, being pressed down upon by an invisible weight.

A few moments of this torture, and they were above water once again.

Desperately grasping for air, Sunny inhaled several times and then weakly looked at the unconscious form of Kai. Crawling toward the archer, he grabbed him and dragged the body back to the rest of the group.

Entrusting him to Cassie, Sunny looked down at the dark water below... and suddenly growled in a low voice.

Turning her head, Nephis asked with a deep frown on her pale face:

"Sunny? What is it?"

Looking at the torso of the giant statue, he gritted his teeth and lingered for a few moments before answering.

Then, in a voice that was dreadfully grim, Sunny said:

"...We have a passenger."

Chapter 229: The Passenger | Shadow Slave

The colossus rose from beneath the turbulent waves, rivers of black water streaming down his stone body. Now that the walking statue had climbed out of the canyon, the cursed sea was barely up to its abdomen... for the moment.

Once the dark waters reached higher, the giant would be submerged in them up to his shoulders once again.

Sunny had to get rid of the unwelcomed passenger until then.

Far below, flattened against the chest of the colossus, a strange creature had attached itself to the ancient statue. It looked like a cross between a translucent jellyfish and an eel. However, Sunny could see a deformed skeleton of a giant humanoid being trapped within the transparent flesh of the repulsive abomination.

P AN DA-NO VEL. COM He shivered.

Compared to the stone giant, the eel looked rather small... however, this was just an illusion. Really, the creature was as large as a train. Its jaws were full of sharp fangs and wide enough to swallow a human whole.

'Curses.'

If there was one good thing about the situation, it was that the eel did not seem to be a Corrupted Nightmare Creature, but merely a Fallen one. Perhaps it survived in the cursed sea by attaching itself to the true terrors of the depths and feeding off the remains of their prey.

As soon as Nephis spoke, Sunny noticed long feelers of the creature tremble and move, as though reacting to the sudden sound. The eel turned its head slightly in their direction.

When he answered, the feelers rippled once again, and the monstrosity turned its head once more, this time staring directly at Sunny.

'Crap...'

A moment later, translucent tentacles appeared from beneath the abomination's body and shot up, finding cracks in the weathered stone and pulling it toward the neck of the colossus.

...Where the cohort was.

Changing Star must have felt something, because tiny white sparks suddenly ignited in the depths of her eyes.

Sunny put a hand on her shoulder and shook his head.

"Don't."

Stone giant or not, lighting a beacon in the middle of the cursed sea was not the best of ideas. Now that it had escaped the confines of the canyon, the real horrors were out and about. Just like the cohort had discussed before, light was their last resort, something they would summon only if the moment came where there was no other choice but for all of them to fight.

And whether Sunny liked it or not, that moment was not upon them yet.

With a reluctant scowl, he turned away and said:

"I'll handle it."

...The giant eel was his problem to solve.

'Yeah, that's great and all. But how the Spell am I supposed to get rid of this thing?'

Looking down, Sunny calculated that he had a dozen or so seconds left before it was time to act. The repulsive abomination was slowly crawling toward them, scaling the torso of the giant statue at a disturbingly steady pace.

'Think, think...'

Several seconds later, Sunny approached Effie and kneeled by her side. Taking the huntress by the hand, he put something into her palm and said:

"Do you feel the colossus moving up and down? That's his steps. I need you to start counting them. If I'm not back after thirty steps, throw the thing I gave you in that direction as hard as you can. Alright?"

Effie gave him a nod. Her usual humor was gone, replaced by grim determination.

"Good. Well... wish me luck."

The huntress lingered for a moment and then said:

"Good luck."

When he was ready to walk away, she suddenly gripped his arm.

Sunny stopped and raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

Effie hesitated before speaking.

"Listen, Sunny... if... if you die... I can have your soul shards, right?"

He stared at her for a second, his face twitching.

'This wench!'

"Absolutely not! If I die, all my shards are to be thrown into the sea. No one is to get anything, understand?"

With that, he left the cohort behind and walked to the edge of the swaying stone platform.

'...Here goes nothing.'

Jumping down, Sunny slid to the giant's shoulder and caught himself from falling all the way into the raging waves by grabbing onto a crack in the stone. To his right, the shoulder was slowly moving as the colossus swung his hand. To his left, a curved path of stone led all the way across the chest of the statue to its other shoulder.

This curving path was, in fact, the collar of the giant's tunic, carved masterfully from stone by the unknown sculptor. Stepping on it, Sunny struggled to keep his balance on the swaying slippery surface and hurried forward.

Soon, he was directly above the climbing eel. The abomination was already close, allowing Sunny to discern every repugnant detail of its translucent, giant body.

'What the hell. Why does everything have to be so disgusting?'

A moment later, he sighed.

'Let's... try this.'

Summoning the Prowling Thorn, Sunny gritted his teeth and cut his forearm, smearing some blood on the blade of the kunai. Then, he used all the strength he had in his body to hurl the dagger down.

The Prowling Thorn spun in the air and hit the giant eel right in the place where its eye should have been. Sunny did not notice any visual organs on the creature's body, but on the deformed humanoid skull hiding beneath the flesh, that's where the eye socket was.

The kunai wedged itself deep into the monster's head, causing a small fountain of crimson blood to erupt upward. Of course, such a tiny wound was nothing for a creature of this size. For a moment, everything became silent.

...Then, hundreds of slender tentacles suddenly exploded from the eel's flesh and shoot in Sunny's direction in a chaotic, slithering mass of translucent flesh.

'Damn it!'

Forced to dismiss the Prowling Thorn to avoid being thrown off the ledge, Sunny lunged forward. A moment later, the tentacles reached his previous position and crashed into the stone, sending shards flying into the air.

Sunny kept running, knowing that the tentacles were just a second away from piercing him. The sounds of breaking stone were thundering just behind his back, getting closer and closer with each moment. The Prowling Thorn appeared in his hand one again.

Reaching the end of the path and with nowhere left to run, Sunny cursed... and jumped straight into the darkness.

Chapter 230: Precarious Battle | Shadow Slave

The eel tried to catch him, but was a second too late.

"Crap!"

Falling toward the dark waves, Sunny threw the kunai in the direction of the stone giant's hand.

Instead of a weapon, the colossus was holding a tool that resembled a mason's hammer. The kunai curved in the air and wrapped the invisible string around its shaft.

'This is going to hurt!'

Sunny plunged into the darkness. A moment later, the string drew taut, and he found himself swinging through the air at a terrible speed. Flying underneath the colossal stone fist, he almost touched the black water with his feet, but then the inertia pulled him up and away.

After a few seconds of weightlessness, Sunny landed on the hammer's head and let out a shaky breath. Without wasting any time, he dislodged the Prowling Thorn and pulled it into his hand, then wedged the dagger in a narrow crack on the surface of the giant hammer.

Landing on it was one thing. Staying here, though... that was something else entirely.

The colossus was swinging his arms as he walked, so Sunny basically found himself on top of a giant pendulum. Not only was the hammer swaying back and forth, but the angle of the surface he was standing on also constantly changed, making it hard not to fly off or slid into the raging sea.

Almost kneeling, Sunny held onto the kunai and tried to keep himself from falling. Then, his face pale and grim, he looked up and glanced at the eel.

"I'm right here, you slimy worm!"

The abomination lingered for a few moments, considering whether it should continue to climb up or follow the sound made by the prey. Finally, it twisted its long, repulsive body and slid over the shoulder of the giant, crawling down his arm.

Toward Sunny.

'Come on, come on!'

He was hoping that his blood will have the same effect on the giant eel as it had on the Corpse Eater. Both were, presumably, Fallen creatures. If one was poisoned to death by Blood Weave, why couldn't the other?

Sunny had not cut himself with the Prowling Thorn for the fun of it.

...Sadly, his blood seemed to have no effect on the eel whatsoever. The monster continued to pursue its prey without showing any signs of being poisoned.

'So... it's not poisonous, really. It just tore that leech from inside because the stupid thing swallowed a whole lot, and the Weave imbued my blood with the odd quality of always being attracted back to the larger mass of it. The Corpse Eater's innards were in the way, so... Damn it!'

His hopes of killing the eel were crushed. Now, Sunny was stuck on the swinging hammer, with his only path of escape blocked by the swiftly approaching abomination.

"Damn it all!"

Letting go of the kunai, Sunny summoned the Midnight Shard and slashed at the slender tentacle that approached him. Even enhanced by the shadow, the blade of the tachi failed to cut the flesh of the Fallen creature, and instead simply batted it away.

'Not good, not good...'

The eel had two types of tentacles. Some were thick, powerful, and few in number. These ones were used to push its massive body forward and hold

onto the swinging arm of the colossus.

The other tentacles were slender, long, and numerous. These were the ones that Sunny now had to dodge and fight against.

The closer the eel got, the more tentacles assaulted Sunny from all sides. Dodging and deflecting them while maintaining his balance on the chaotically swinging hammer was an almost impossible task.

Luckily, Sunny had practiced the firm battle style of the Stone Saint and incorporated it into his own technique. Its steadiness and indomitability were translated through grounded footwork, which allowed him to plant himself on the stone surface of the hammer and refuse to be thrown off or moved even by an inch.

Between choking breaths, Sunny couldn't help but think that Nephis was right. The best fighters weren't those who were the strongest, but those who were the most adaptable.

The foundational style he had learned from her had served him well on the streets of the Dark City. But if he had continued to follow it narrowly and neglected to add flexibility to his technique by incorporating the Stone Saint's style into it, he would be dead by now.

The Dream Realm was wild, unpredictable, and often defied logic. It threw all kinds of horrors at those unfortunate enough to step foot inside its vast expanse. Take this situation, for example... what kind of a person would imagine that, one day, they would have to fight a translucent eel the size of a train atop a walking stone colossus?

Sunny certainly never expected to find himself in such a situation. Only a complete lunatic would.

That's why adaptability was the most important trait an Awakened fighter could possess.

...But even though Sunny had taken all the right steps, the seconds he had left to live were numbered. The onslaught of the slender tentacles was

already too much for him to handle. And they were only growing in number.

'Twenty-eight.'

With an inaudible sigh, Sunny allowed the shadow to slide off his body and rush toward the approaching eel. Instantly weakened, he gritted his teeth and tried to resist the attacking tentacles as best as he could.

One of them hit against the blade of the Midnight Shard with tremendous force, sending it flying from his hand into the darkness of the night.

The other hit him across the chest, causing Sunny to yelp in pain and roll back, almost sliding off the surface of the hammer. Catching himself at the last moment, he pushed away and rolled, barely avoiding being pierced through the chest by the third.

He had nowhere to retreat anymore...

But it was fine.

'Twenty-nine.'

Back at the circular platform, Effie strained her muscles and hurled the thing entrusted to her by Sunny into the air.

It was the Ordinary Rock.

Flying away, the Memory suddenly screamed:

"Thirty steps!"

Its loud scream caused the feelers on the eel's head to ripple. The giant creature suddenly turned its head in the direction of the noise, its terrifying maw opening in hunger.

For a moment, it paid Sunny no attention.

Its weight also shifted, leaning over the abyss of black water.

Right then, a human shadow glided right in front of it, and two crimson eyes ignited in its depths. The Stone Saint stepped out of the shadow, which then instantly wrapped itself around the taciturn monster and filled her with immeasurable power.

The Shadow's sword flashed.

P AN DA-NO VEL. COM Sunny wasn't trying to kill the eel. Despite all of the Stone Saint's might, she was too weak to slay something that abominable.

He just wanted to sever one of the main tentacles that supported most of the eel's weight.

Augmented with the power of shadows, the stone knight easily cut into the flesh of the eel and sliced one of the thickest tentacles apart. Losing its purchase, the repulsive creature shuddered... and slid helplessly from the swinging arm of the colossus, falling into the turbulent black waves with a splash.

Then, it was gone, pulled away by the strong current.

Sunny fell to his knees and drew in a deep breath.

Then, he said in a cold, raspy voice:

"This ride ain't free, bastard. Next time, buy a ticket."

Chapter 231: Stone Giant | Shadow Slave

Sunny remained on the swinging hammer of the colossus for a while, resting and trying to catch his breath. However, very soon, the dark sea rose high enough to make his position perilous.

With a deep sigh, he stood up and dislodged the Prowling Thorn from the stones. Waiting for the colossus to raise his hand, Sunny jumped down. The wind whistled in his ears, and a few moments later, he landed on the wrist of the giant in a roll. As soon as Sunny got back to his feet, the stone surface beneath plummeted down.

Thrusting the kunai in another crack, he gritted his teeth and held on to his dear life. Soon, the ground he was standing on sloped down, and then turned into a vertical wall, with nothing but the dark abyss of the cursed sea visible below. Hanging off that wall, Sunny cursed and waited for the colossus to bring his arm back up.

When it finally happened, Sunny immediately dashed forward. He had several precious seconds before the pendulum swung again, and had to cover as much distance as possible with each swing of the giant's arm.

Too slow, and the cursed sea would catch up to him.

The closer he got to the elbow of the walking statue, the more inclined his path was. Eventually, Sunny had to climb instead of run. His hands were tired from fighting and supporting his weight, but he stubbornly continued moving forward and up.

Once Sunny reached the elbow and climbed higher, the amplitude of the swinging reduced considerably. Now he just had to scale the vertical wall and reach the shoulder of the giant.

Climbing the slippery stone was not easy, but he had gotten used to such tasks a long time ago. In any case, it was way better than that time Sunny

had to race against the rising sea during a furious storm, only to get swept away by the black water and be saved by Nephis at the last moment.

This time, at least, he didn't need her to save his life.

That would be embarrassing...

Some time later, Sunny climbed over the edge of the circular platform, crawled to its center, and sprawled beside the other members of the cohort, who were waiting for his return with tense expressions on their faces.

"Sunny? Are you alright?"

P AN DA-NO VEL. COM Kai was back to his senses, looking a little bit disheveled, but still ridiculously gorgeous. Sunny stared at him in dismay, then sighed.

"...I'm alive."

A short while later, Nephis called out to him:

"What were you fighting?"

Sunny grimaced.

"A big ugly worm. I threw him back into the water."

With that, he reluctantly sat up and looked at the surface of the dark sea, which was already flowing over the shoulders of the stone giant.

Its surface was black and tranquil. No one was pursuing them, it seemed.

"It's gone now, so rest up. I'll keep watch."

He stayed awake until the break of dawn and then woke the members of the cohort. When they rose to their feet, Sunny lay down on the cold stone and tiredly closed his eyes.

Yesterday, he had thought that he would not be able to fall asleep atop the walking stone giant. However, Sunny had underestimated how exhausting this long night would end up being. Even the body of a powerful Sleeper needed rest.

Actually, the swinging of the stone platform was sort of soothing. Soon, he was fast asleep.

...When Sunny woke up, the sun was already high in the sky. Yawning, he sat up, summoned the Endless Spring and greedily drank some water. Someone had left a plate of food near him, so without thinking too much, Sunny picked it up and had himself a late breakfast.

'Ah, that hits the spot.'

Recognizing the taste of Neph's cooking, he glanced at their intrepid leader and smiled.

It was nice to laze around while others were working.

While Sunny was sleeping, the stone platform had transformed. Plates of iron stripped of the abominable spiders and stored in Effie's bag were inserted around its perimeter, with the golden rope strung between them as an improvised railing. More of these plates were shaped into makeshift rods and placed in the center to serve as throwing spears in case the cohort was attacked from the air.

Currently, Kai and Effie were building additional battlements on the left shoulder of the giant while Nephis observed their progress from above.

They were taking no chances. A trip through the Labyrinth, no matter how fantastical, was still full of danger. It was better to be safe than sorry.

Sunny scoffed.

'So much work. What's the wors... uh, no. I'm not going to finish that thought. No thanks!'

On the stone beside him, the shadow applauded sarcastically.

Shaking his head, Sunny finished his food in silence and moved to the edge of the platform to look down at the vista of the Forgotten Shore.

Far below, the landscape of the Labyrinth was slowly moving past them. The stone giant was marching south, indifferently crushing mountains of crimson coral under his feet with each step. The view was simultaneously hypnotic and depressing.

In every direction, as far away as Sunny could see, there was nothing but red coral, with rare heights protruding from it into the grey skies here and there. The Forgotten Shore was truly vast.

And every inch of it was full of unspeakable dangers.

Not too far from him, Caster was also busy studying the landscape. However, his interest wasn't purely idle. Changing Star's map was on the stones beside him, and the proud Legacy was drawing new marks on it from time to time.

Sunny sighed.

The cohort might have caught a ride on the shoulder of the stone giant to reach their destination at the edges of the Forgotten Shore, but they were going to have to walk all the way back to the Dark City by themselves.

That was months of traveling through this treacherous hellscape, with nothing but their own strength and wit to keep them alive. The information Caster was putting on the map today was going to be priceless to them in the future.

...But that was a problem for tomorrow.

Right now, Sunny deserved a little respite.

Turning away from the handsome young man, he lowered his gaze and peered at the sights below.

...It was not every day that one got an opportunity to enjoy a beautiful view of hell.

Chapter 232: Before The Storm

In the next few hours, Sunny did nothing but leisurely gaze at the vistas of the Labyrinth. While monotonous, they were still picturesque and breathtaking.

P AN DA-NO VEL. COM The Forgotten Shore was a harrowing, but beautiful place. The somber grey sky and the black earth created a perfect backdrop for the vibrant crimson sea of twisting coral blades. Here and there, strange landmarks broke the dullness of the landscape, igniting the flames of curiosity in Sunny's heart.

After all, he was nothing if not a passionate explorer.

Provided, most of his explorations ended with something dying at the end of his blade. But still...

Out there in the depths of the Labyrinth, Sunny saw many things that piqued his interest.

The skeletal remains of colossal monsters, with signs of ferocious battles written in the marks on their bones. Broken wrecks of giant vessels, with terrible breaches in their mighty hulls. Abyssal chasms that were full of darkness and emptiness, leading into the depths of this cursed land where true horrors dwelt. And things he couldn't even describe, let alone identify.

He even saw several vast ruins that must have been entire cities once. Now, only unclear shapes of magnificent buildings remained, overgrown with crimson coral and barely resembling anything made by a human hand.

He didn't know if they had existed before or simultaneously with the Dark City. Regardless, it seemed that no other human settlement on the Forgotten Shore had withstood the curse of darkness as the cursed city had.

They were all destroyed and devoured, first by the crimson coral, then by the ruthless flow of time. Now, no one was left to remember that these proud cities had ever existed.

The seven heroes that created the Starlight Legion were described as those born in all-consuming darkness. That suggested that humans had resisted the curse for a while, at least. Maybe the Dark City was built long after the darkness had devoured this land, as the last sanctuary and fortress for those who remained.

...A lot of good had that done, in the end.

His reverie was broken by Cassie, who suddenly turned south and frowned. Her quick movement drew everyone's attention.

Sunny instantly had a bad feeling.

Nephis turned to the blind girl and frowned.

"Cassie? Do you feel something?"

Cassia lingered for a few moments and then said, her voice uncertain:

"I think... I think a storm is coming."

Sunny looked at the sky, which like always was covered in a grey veil of clouds. Nothing seemed to indicate that there was going to be a tempest turning it impenetrably dark and furious soon.

But that was just how things worked on the Forgotten Shore. Storms came out of nowhere and destroyed everyone unfortunate enough to be caught in their murderous embrace.

If Cassie said that she felt one approaching, then it was. Their oracle had a good track record of sensing such things.

'Damn...'

A storm meant that the cursed sea would rise from the depths earlier than usual. It also meant that there would be rain and lightning, which would make the behavior of the dwellers of the depths unpredictable.

It also meant hurricane winds, and that was really bad news when you were stuck on a moving colossus two hundred meters above the ground.

Nephis gritted her teeth.

"You heard her. Prepare..."

However, the blind girl interrupted her.

"Wait. There is something else."

Changing Star lingered for a moment, then asked:

"You are sensing another threat?"

Cassie scowled, then said in a strange tone.

"No, not sensing. I just... I can hear something strange. It's like a rustle."

Everyone stared at her for a few seconds, trying to understand the meaning behind her words.

Strangely, Kai was the first one to react. Suddenly pale, he spun around and summoned his bow. Before anyone could understand what was happening, something whistled in the air, and a dark shape forcefully crashed into the stone platform, smearing it with blood. A black arrow was protruding from its body.

Sunny jumped out of the way and gasped, stunned by the force with which the monster impacted against the stone. It had to have been in a long dive before being pierced by Kai's arrow, mere moments away from snatching one of them away.

The creature looked somewhat like a giant locust. Its body was covered in black chitin and comparatively small, no bigger than that of an adult human. Its wide wings were thin and transparent. As it convulsed in death throes, the wings moved, threatening to push the members of the cohort off of the platform. Nephis dashed forward, grabbed the disgusting creature and threw it down.

Kai was already grabbing another arrow. There was an expression of panic on his face.

Sunny blinked.

'Why is he panicking? The monster is already...'

As though hearing his thoughts, Kai glanced at the members of the cohort with wide eyes and yelled:

"Swarms! These fiends hunt in swarms! Get ready!"

Before he could finish, Sunny was already summoning the Midnight Shard and the Stone Saint.

'...dead!'

By now, everyone could hear the rustling sound Cassie had told them about. It seemed to be coming from nowhere, surrounding them like a wave. For a few moments, nothing happened. The members of the cohort tensely stared up, wai...

Suddenly, a black dot appeared in the grey clouds and swiftly fell down, covering the distance to the neck of the colossus almost instantly. Before it could attack, though, Effie's spear collided with it. The giant locust practically exploded, sending a rain of blood splattering against the stone back of the colossus.

But by the time the huntress dismissed her spear and before she had the time to summon it again, there was another dot, and another, and another...

Kai shot one more creature out of the air, while Caster used a strange sling he summoned from his Soul Sea to break the wings of another. Nephis raised her sword and yelled:

"Cassie! Wind!"

Flinching, the blind girl began to call upon her wooden staff.

While white sparks of light were still weaving the shape of it in her hands, the Quiet Dancer flew out of its scabbard by itself and flashed into the air, piercing an approaching locust clean through.

A few moments later, a powerful gale shot from the wooden staff into the skies, slowing the attacking locusts down and sending them staggering.

One of these stragglers somehow managed to land on the platform and immediately jumped at Sunny.

Changing his stance on the fly, Sunny slashed with his sword, decapitating the repulsive creature.

However, because of the inertia, the massive body continued to move forward, slamming into him at great speed.

With a curse, Sunny flew back and fell over the railing. Sliding on the stone, he rolled down to the stone giant's shoulder and caught himself on the part of the defensive fence built by Effie and Kai. Then, he stood up and spat a mouthful of blood.

A moment later, Sunny froze, his eyes widening.

Because of the tumble, he accidentally looked down to the ground. What he saw there made him shiver.

...Numerous dark shapes were appearing from the Labyrinth and jumping at the colossus, swiftly climbing up his giant stone body.

Chapter 233: Swarm | Shadow Slave

As the members of the cohort killed several giant locusts, their repulsive black bodies fell to the ground, raining blood on the walking colossus and the crimson coral of the Labyrinth.

As soon as their corpses hit the ground, it suddenly moved. Dark figures appeared from beneath the mud, rushing at the dead locusts to devour them. Hundreds of monsters were suddenly competing for the few scraps of meat. After several bloody fights broke out and the winners were decided, those who had not gotten to satiate their hunger turned their heads and followed the smell of blood.

...Right back to the moving stone giant.

Looking down with dark resentment, Sunny saw numerous creatures jumping at the legs of the walking statue from the mounds of coral and quickly climbing up. They were headed right to where the cohort was being besieged by the swarm of winged abominations.

He couldn't see the shape of them clearly, but there was no doubt that these monsters were bad news.

'Damnation...'

[...slain an awakened beast, Flesh Reaver.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Turning around, Sunny summoned the Prowling Thorn and hurled it upward. A moment later, using the invisible string as support, he was flying through the air. Grabbing onto the edge of the circular platform, he hoisted himself up and once again faced the carnage.

The kunai flashed, cutting the wing of one of the locusts clean off. Suddenly crippled, the creature toppled and plummeted down, no doubt to be devoured by the horde of Nightmare Creatures approaching from below.

The battle with the swarm was not going too great for the cohort. The turbulent winds summoned by Cassie's staff bought them some breathing room by making it hard for the locusts to approach the platform at high speed, but there were just too many of them.

Kai was setting one arrow after another loose. After that one first shot, he had not used the Blood Arrow, choosing instead to rely on his mundane ones. In the chaotic mess of this sudden battle, it was too easy to miss. Plus, he didn't need a lot of power to deliver debilitating wounds to the locusts.

They were basically skewering themselves on the arrows themselves by diving from the skies with incredible speed. Still, the abominable reavers were awakened beasts. It wasn't easy for a Sleeper to kill one with just a single shot.

Just as Sunny grabbed the kunai and spun to avoid a glancing blow from one of the creatures, another one landed on the platform. Two arrows were sticking from its cracked chitin, but the locust was still alive.

...Not for long, though.

Just a moment after the repulsive bug landed, Neph's sword flashed through the air, slicing it in half. Sending the mangled body off the platform with a powerful kick, Changing Star turned to Kai and yelled:

"Don't try to kill them! Break their wings!"

With a sudden light of understanding in his eyes, the archer changed his approach.

Indeed, that made sense. The members of the cohort didn't need to slay the locusts. They just needed to make it so the flying scourges weren't able to reach the stone platform.

Effie, meanwhile, did not need this advice. Everything she hit simply exploded into a disgusting puddle of bloody goo.

The problem the huntress faced was that there was no powerful range weapon she could use. Her beautiful spear was not really suited to be thrown that often.

The Memories were created from soul essence. Once a Memory was dismissed, that essence returned to the core of the Awakened that had summoned it. However, if it was too far away from them, the essence was simply wasted — unless the Memory had a special enchantment like that of the Blood Arrow.

The essence wasn't lost forever, as it would slowly accumulate inside the soul core until the peak capacity was reached once again. But this process took time, so one could not endlessly throw their Memories at the enemy during a battle. Especially not once they reached a rank where managing one's soul essence was of higher importance.

Effie had not reached such a rank yet, but she was still limited by that principle. That's why she resorted to using makeshift darts fashioned out of plates of spider iron. There wasn't much of them left, however. Once the last dart was gone, she would have to either exhaust her pool of soul essence or risk fighting the attacking locusts in melee.

Just like the Stone Saint was doing right now. As Sunny rushed toward Nephis, he noticed the Shadow lowering her shoulder and raising her shield. In the next moment, one of the repulsive creatures crashed into it at full speed... and simply crumbled, black blood exploding into the air through the cracks in the shattered chitin.

[You have slain...]

The huntress, however, did not have the benefit of weighing a literal ton. Despite her graceful appearance, the Saint was made out of stone, and stone was much heavier than flesh. It was also much harder to rip and slice apart. Once Effie was forced to fight the locusts with nothing but her spear and shield, her life would be in real danger.

'Curses, curses, curse it all!'

Swiftly approaching Changing Star, Sunny kicked a disgusting piece of a killed creature off the platform and yelled:

"We have a problem!"

Nephis sharply looked at him and scowled.

"What?"

P AN DA-NOV EL, COM Sunny hesitated for a moment, and then gestured down.

"There's a couple of hundred Labyrinth creatures crawling all over the colossus. They'll be here pretty soon!"

Nephis gritted her teeth, then glanced at the members of the cohort.

Cassie was holding the wooden staff, sending powerful bursts of wind into the sky to slow down the attacking swarm. The Quiet Dancer was flashing through the air, protecting her from the locusts to the best of its ability. Caster was spinning his strange sling, aiming at the wings of the repulsive creatures. His face was calm and grim.

Everyone was barely holding on and one mistake away from death.

With a dark look in her cold grey eyes, Nephis looked at Sunny. Then, she said:

"...Come with me, then."

Chapter 234: Horde | Shadow Slave

Briefly giving Caster a few instructions, Nephis walked over to the edge of the platform and looked down. When she saw the numerous creatures climbing the stone giant, a grim expression appeared on her face.

Sunny weighed the Prowling Thorn in his hand and asked:

"So, what's the plan?"

Changing Star glanced at him and smiled darkly.

"What else? Kill as many as you can."

With that, she jumped down and landed softly on the shoulder of the colossus. With a sigh, Sunny followed.

'Figures!'

A moment later, they separated. Nephis dashed to the opposite side of the moving statue, running on the wide stone path of its collar. She was going to try and deal with those creatures that were climbing the front and the left side of the giant.

Sunny was going to have to stop those coming from the right and the back. He wasn't sure that just two of them were going to be enough to cover all that space, but they didn't have a lot of choices.

Sunny and Nephis at least had the high ground advantage against the enemy. Those fighting against the swarm of monstrous locusts, however, did not. The cohort couldn't spare anyone else for this task.

Looking down, he was finally able to discern the shape of the attacking Labyrinth dwellers. They looked like massive primates covered in dirty, grey fur. Their arms were strong and muscular, easily pulling their heavy bodies up the ancient stone surface. Each had a mouth full of sharp teeth, with two curved tusks protruding from it, as long as daggers.

The most disturbing fact about these beasts was that there were crimson flowers growing from within the bloody gaps in their flesh. Some even had pale stems slithering from one eye socket to another. With a shiver, Sunny realized that this tribe of Nightmare Creatures were simply hosts for a different, much more terrifying one.

The primates were nothing but meat puppets for those ghoulish flowers.

'Oh gods...'

Summoning the Ordinary Rock, Sunny wrapped his body in the shadow, strained his muscles, and threw it down as hard as he could. The small rock plunged through the air and collided with one of the creatures far below, hitting it right in the forehead and splitting its rotten skull apart.

Not paying any attention to the fact that half of its head was missing, the primate continued climbing up.

Sunny gritted his teeth and dismissed the rock.

'...Just as I thought.'

Nothing could ever be simple on the Forgotten Shore. The cohort would never be just attacked by a swarm of flying abominations. There had to be a horde of monstrous primates attacking them from the ground, too! And gods forbid those powerful beasts were not parasitized by even more ghastly horrors.

'At least their bodies are not so tough due to their partially decomposed state.'

That was something he could work with...

Just as the first primate climbed into the range of the Prowling Thorn, something thundered above Sunny, and in the next moment, he was doused from head to toe in fetid black blood. A mangled corpse of a giant locust flew past him and fell down.

Sunny frozen for a second, then growled.

'I am a walking target now, aren't I? Well... great! Let them come! The more, the merrier!'

Extending the invisible string to its maximum length, Sunny aimed and hurled the kunai down. He guided it by ever so slightly pulling on the string.

The dagger flashed through the air and spun, drawing a curved path. A few moments later, it cut across the wrist of one of the menacing primates, cleanly severing its hand.

Suddenly losing purchase, the beast instantly fell down. After plummeting from the deadly height, it hit the crimson corals below and practically exploded into bloody chunks.

Sunny listened to the emptiness, a tense expression on his face.

[You have slain an awakened monster, Blood Flower.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

A relieved expression appeared on his face. At least these things weren't indestructible...

Raising a hand, he caught the returning kunai and instantly threw it again.

There wasn't much time left.

Countless beasts were climbing up the stone body of the ancient colossus, covering a frightening amount of distance with each second. He had to slaughter as many of them as he could before they reached the battlement constructed on the giant's shoulder, or else they were going to rip him apart.

In the next few minutes, Sunny did nothing but control the Prowling Thorn as it flew through the air, cutting through flesh and bone alike. The heavy kunai never stayed in his hand for more than a second, reaping a bountiful harvest of lives.

More than a dozen beasts — those who were ahead of the approaching horde — were thrown off the statue and fell to their deaths, rewarding Sunny with an enviable amount of shadow fragments.

However, he was still too slow. Sunny had to be both swift and precise when throwing the dagger, lest he wanted to be pulled off the giant's swaying shoulder himself. What's worse, he had to constantly pay attention to the sky and dodge the attacking locusts when they dove from above to devour him.

The horde of terrible beasts was getting closer and closer, their arrival as inevitable as it would be fatal.

The situation got even worse when another group of them reached the gargantuan statue's back. Now, Sunny not only had to deal with the monsters climbing its side, but also rush from his perch on the shoulder of the steadily moving colossus to the treacherous path of his collar to prevent the fastest climbers from reaching too high.

'Bad, bad, this is bad...'

Covered in blood and with his muscles burning, Sunny continued to slaughter the ghastly beasts as fast as he could.

But he wasn't fast enough.

At some point, Sunny realized that the climbing monstrosities were now mere meters away from him. He could see every disturbing detail of their rotting bodies, with strangely graceful flowers growing from the bloody gaps. Their crimson petals trembled as they smelled prey.

Suddenly, one of the primates strained its powerful legs and jumped into the air, instantly covering the remaining distance to Sunny's position. Before it could land, however, the Midnight Shard slashed the creature across its massive body, cutting it apart.

...What flowed out of the terrible wound, however, was not blood, but a vast cloud of red pollen.

Before Sunny could register the fact, he had already breathed in a whole lungful of it.

His eyes widened.

'Oh... oh no! This is not good!'

Chapter 235: Flower Boy | Shadow Slave

As the red pollen settled in his lungs, Sunny suddenly sensed something subtly moving inside them. Then, a wave of excruciating pain pierced his chest. With a loud scream, he fell to his knees and grabbed at the Puppeteer's Shroud. A stream of blood escaped from his mouth and splashed on the ancient stone.

In it, tiny blooms were sprouting roots, greedily drinking the crimson liquid and growing with visible speed.

Looking at them with dark resentment, Sunny gritted his teeth and slowly stood up.

By the time he straightened his back, the pain had subsided a little. The bloodthirsty flowers were already turning black and dying, destroyed by the odd blessing of the Blood Weave.

The insidious Nightmare Creature tried to devour him from inside, but really, it just signed its own death sentence. In a few short minutes, it would be destroyed completely by the furnace of his tenacious body.

And even if some part of it survived, Neph's purifying flames were going to finish the job.

...Until then, he would just have to endure this torture.

"Come... come closer, you bastards!"

As the Midnight Shard appeared in his hands, another monster was already climbing onto the shoulder of the walking colossus.

Lunging forward, Sunny brandished his sword and decapitated the foul creature, then kicked it in the chest to send it flying down. A moment later, he jumped back, narrowly avoiding being grabbed by another primate.

Before the beast could even react, the razor-sharp tachi flashed across its body, severing both of its arms.

More red pollen burst into the air. Holding his breath, Sunny shifted his stance and attacked once again in one swift, fluid motion. The Midnight Shard pierced the knee of the massive primate, making it topple.

The creature wasn't dead, but any kind of mobility it once had was pretty much gone.

'Good enough...'

But it didn't really matter. Three other monsters were already there, ready to take the fallen creature's place. And a few seconds later, there was going to be even more of them, and then even more still — until, eventually, Sunny was torn apart by the unstoppable flood of these harrowing fiends.

He would have to think of something before that happened.

'If only I could breathe...'

Fighting through the excruciating pain that was tearing him from inside, Sunny grimaced and dashed forward to face the enemies.

In the next minute or so, he forced himself to cut out all unnecessary thoughts, turning into a ruthless hurricane of steel. The Midnight Shard danced from one Nightmare Creature to another, piercing, slashing, and severing their rotting flesh. The air was soon obscured by a vast cloud of red pollen.

At some point, Sunny gritted his teeth and disengaged from the fight, leaving a carpet of bleeding bodies in his wake. Launching himself back a few meters, he slid on the stone and left the cloud of red mist. Only then, finally, he allowed himself to draw in a deep breath.

Sensing that their enemy was gone, the primates rushed forward. However, a moment later, something glistened in the mist, and a heavy triangular blade suddenly pierced the head of the leading creature.

The Blood Flower did not react to its host being damaged and continued its lunge. But in the next second, the head of the monstrous ape was violently jerked backward, and, losing balance, it fell down.

The string of the Prowling Thorn was coiled around the support pillars of the makeshift battlement, creating an invisible trap. By moving forward with the kunai still stuck in its skull, the unfortunate creature pulled the string taut, causing an invisible net to rise into the air. Entangled in it, half a dozen creatures tumbled to the ground, blocking the others from pursuing Sunny.

Neither the battlement nor the invisible string were going to last long, but at least it bought him a few seconds.

[You have slain an awakened monster, Blood Flower.]

[Your shadow...]

'...Finally.'

The Nightmare Creature in his lungs was finally dead. Spitting out a mouthful of blood, Sunny groaned, wiped his lips, and glanced back.

What he saw made him curse.

The group of monstrous primates climbing the back of the colossus was about to reach the collar of the stone tunic.

Sunny was about to be surrounded. And he was all out of ideas.

'...If I die today, I am at least going to drag as many of you as possible with me into a deeper, darker hell. Prepare yourselves, gangrels!'

Lunging forward, he ran on the narrow stone path and got to the middle of the giant's back just in time to collide with the first of the advancing primates and send it flying all the way down to the distant surface of the Labyrinth.

Unlike the shoulder of the colossus, Sunny had no room to maneuver on the narrow path. In fact, he was having trouble simply keeping his balance due to the constant swaying.

But the primates, with their wide shoulders and mighty frames, were in an even worse situation than him.

On that narrow stone path, one man would be able to stop an entire army.

...Provided that nothing attacked him from behind, of course. Which was bound to happen...

Cursing, Sunny slashed and slashed, sending one monster tumbling down in a billowing cloud of red pollen after another. Despite all his efforts, he had to retreat step after step to avoid being surrounded and killed by the ferocious abominations.

The situation was becoming desperate. Especially so because the creatures that had been slowed down for a bit by the string of the Prowling Thorn finally wrestled free of it, and were seconds away from reaching his current position.

'Damnation!'

Sending a primate that was facing him staggering with a devastating blow of the Midnight Shard, Sunny desperately spun to deflect the attack from the creature approaching him from the back.

However, he was a fraction of a second too late.

Realizing that he won't be able to block or dodge the paw of the monstrous ape, Sunny feverishly tried to come up with a way to minimize the damage, at least.

...But just as the claws of the creature were about to grab onto his neck, a swift shadow suddenly fell from the skies. Catching the primate with its sharp mandibles, one of the locusts easily tore its head off and dashed back, devouring the prey with terrifying speed as it flew.

In the next moment, more Flesh Weavers fell from the skies, aiming at the climbing primates.

The two tribes of Nightmare Creatures were suddenly locked in a ferocious battle, with the six humans hopelessly stuck in-between.

Chapter 236: Ex Machina | Shadow Slave

With his back to the stone surface of the ancient statue, Sunny stared as the two tribes of Nightmare Creatures clashed in a cacophony of eerie roars and rustling noises.

Discovering a new target, swarming locusts swiftly fell from the skies and cut into the horde of the Blood Flower hosts, devouring scores of unfortunate primates in mere moments. Torn and eviscerated by the sharp mandibles, their flesh seemed to almost melt in the terrible maws of the flying abominations.

However, the massive beasts were not entirely defenseless. Any locust that lingered for a fraction of a second more than it should have was immediately grabbed and torn to pieces by the powerful primates, its black blood falling like dew on the petals of the crimson flowers that grew from their rotting bodies.

Some hosts even jumped off the colossus to grab onto diving reavers and tumble together to the distant ground.

In just a few seconds, the surface of the ancient giant and the air around him was consumed by utter chaos.

Indifferent to everything, the colossus steadily marched south.

'...Come to your senses!'

Shaking off his astonishment, Sunny swiftly finished off the primate that he had staggered a second before and pushed the heavy creature from the narrow path.

Despite the fact that their enemies were now fighting each other, the pressure on the cohort did not decrease. In fact, it only grew heavier.

Cursing under his breath, Sunny threw the Midnight Shard at another lunging monster, turned his back to the enemies, and jumped. Grabbing

onto a crack in the ancient stone, he pulled his body up and nimbly scaled the neck of the ancient statue.

For several seconds that seemed to last an eternity, Sunny was completely defenseless against the potential attacks by the monstrous locusts. However, to his luck, Nephis had chosen that exact moment to unleash her flames on the other side of the statue. A blinding flash of white drowned the skies for a second, confusing the reavers and buying him enough time to reach the stone platform.

Climbing over its edge, Sunny rolled away and sprawled on the cold stone, trying to catch his breath.

His body was in agony. The Blood Weave might have destroyed the flower growing in his lungs, but the damage was already done. Sunny had trouble breathing and felt bloody foam bubbling on his lips. Every time he inhaled, a sharp pain pierced his entire being.

'Not... not too terrible...'

Although troublesome, these wounds were not going to kill him. Sleepers healed better and faster than mundane humans, and Sunny in particular was also transformed by the drop of Weaver's ichor, making him much tougher and harder to kill than most.

...Sort of like a cockroach.

As for the pain, he had been through worse and survived. As long as Sunny had adrenaline numbing it to some degree, he was capable of giving a fight still.

Not that it would be pleasant...

With a moan, Sunny picked himself up from the ground and looked around.

Things were slowly turning from bad to worse.

Kai was long out of arrows and had to resort to using his morbid Ascended Memory. Judging by how pale his face was, he had already missed a few

shots, losing a lot of blood as the result.

Cassie was still trying to maintain the powerful winds that slowed the attacking locusts down, but her face and hands were covered in blood. It seemed that even the powerful enchantment of her armor and the ardent protection of the Quiet Dancer were not enough to fully save her from harm.

Effie was now fighting the flying abominations in melee, having only a fraction of a second to react every time they attacked her. Blood was streaming down her legs, her white chiton torn and soaked with it. Her bronze helmet was gone, lying shattered on the stones.

Caster did not seem to be wounded, but his face was dark with exhaustion. Maintaining his incredible speed was taxing on both the mind and the body, so he would not be able to last much longer, either.

The Stone Saint... was the Stone Saint. The taciturn Shadow was covered in black blood from head to toe and completely indifferent to it, which only enhanced her dark and menacing visage. She continued to move with elegant grace, protecting the members of the cohort to the best of her ability. But she couldn't be everywhere all at once.

...And then there was Sunny himself, who was in the worst shape out of all of them by far.

'Curses!'

And the worst news was that now that he had to retreat back to the platform, the abominable primates were about to follow him, forcing the cohort to defend itself from two sides simultaneously.

Even worst still, unlike Sunny, the other members didn't have Blood Weave to protect them from the red pollen.

'Bad, bad, this is bad...'

Just as Sunny was thinking that thought, a bloodied hand suddenly appeared from the other side of the platform. A moment later, Nephis slid under the golden rope and shakily rose to her feet.

Changing Star had white flames dancing in her eyes. Her skin seemed to shine with a soft glow, as though there was fire burning beneath it.

...That fire, if Sunny had to guess, was responsible for annihilating the red pollen as soon as it entered her body.

The Starlight Legion Armor was heavily damaged and seemed to be on the verge of melting, but still held, protecting the last daughter of the Immortal Flame clan to the end.

Not paying any attention to the members of the cohort, Nephis turned her head and looked south.

'What is she...'

Before Sunny could finish the thought, he was distracted by the sight of an ugly primate head rising above the edge of the circular platform. Cursing, he grabbed a jagged piece of chitin laying nearby and shoved it into the creature's eyes, forcibly pushing it back down.

At the same moment, an especially large locust suddenly fell from the sky. Batting the Quiet Dancer away, it dove right for Cassie.

Before anyone could react, its mandibles clicked.

However, instead of soft flesh, all they caught was the hard wood of the enchanted staff. The blind girl had managed to defend herself at the last moment.

The impact was still strong enough to throw her far back, nevertheless. Breaking the improvised barrier with her back, Cassie screamed... and slipped from the platform, plummeting down like a broken doll.

'No!'

The Prowling Thorn was damaged and restoring itself in the Soul Sea, and the golden rope was tied around the platform. He didn't know what to...

As the sound of a bow clattering on the stone reached his ears, Sunny saw Kai diving down from the neck of the colossus. Flying with incredible speed, he caught up with Cassie and grabbed her by the arm.

The two of them froze in the air for a moment, absolutely defenseless against the approaching locusts.

'No, no, no!'

...But the fatal attack never came.

Suddenly, the cacophony of the battle died down, turning into deathly silence.

Sunny blinked.

Several locusts were hovering in the air mere meters away from Cassie and Kai, but they were in no hurry to devour the helpless humans. In fact, they, too, seemed frozen.

A moment later, the locusts suddenly turned around and dashed away. In fact, the whole swarm was swiftly retreating, flying away from the stone colossus with as much speed as the gluttonous abominations could muster.

It was as if... they were fleeing from something.

Many of the locusts were carrying dead primates in their claws. It seemed as though the reavers were the ultimate victors in this terrible battle against the monstrous apes.

...But Sunny was pretty sure that, soon, the whole tribe of these terrible creatures was going to have crimson blooms growing from the cracks in their chitin. Blood Flowers were truly a horrifying enemy. Who knew what they would be capable of after subjugating a whole swarm of flying abominations?

The more pressing question, however, was... what were the locusts running from?

Sunny looked down, only to realize that the giant primates were also retreating, rushing down the body of the ancient statue in something that almost resembled panic.

Then, finally, he turned and looked south, following the line of Changing Star's gaze.

His face paled.

Out there, directly in the path of the walking statue, an inconceivably vast wall of furious darkness had devoured the whole world. It was swiftly moving in their direction, bolts of lightning illuminating the raging depths of clouds almost every second.

The storm was approaching.

Chapter 237: Wall of Darkness

Kai landed on the stone platform, gently placing Cassie down. The blind girl was deathly pale and visibly hurt, but her life didn't seem to be in danger. The archer smiled reassuringly and gripped her shoulder.

Then, just like the rest of them, he turned his head and silently looked south.

A wall of impenetrable, furious darkness was approaching from there, devouring vast spans of the Labyrinth with each second. To Sunny, it felt like an endless ocean of deranged shadows was rushing to drown them. The pressure he felt was almost as bad as that of the ominous Crimson Spire.

The colossus was marching toward the darkness, completely indifferent to its menacing oppression.

The wind rustled Sunny's hair. In the stunned silence, Effie suddenly fell to her knees with a pained groan. Her hands were pressed against the breach in her archaic cuirass, bright blood streaming from beneath them.

That sound brought everyone back to reality. With a grim expression on her face, Nephis walked over to the wounded huntress and gently placed her hands on her body. A moment later, soft white radiance shone through the cracks of Effie's armor, healing her wounds and taking the pain away.

Changing Star closed her eyes and bit her lip, drops of crimson blood rolling down her ivory skin.

To take away her companion's suffering, she had to endure a much more harrowing torture.

Sunny coughed, bloody foam flying from his lips, and weakly lowered himself to the ground. He didn't feel too well.

The wall of darkness was growing closer with every moment. The wind was picking up, whistling in the cracks of the ancient statue. It brought the smell

of the sea with it.

Sunny grimaced and commanded the Stone Saint to walk over and stand above him.

"What are we going to do now?"

Kai shivered, glanced at the raging wall of clouds, and said:

"Climb lower? The lightning is bound to be drawn to the neck of this giant."

Sunny shook his head.

"We can't. The sea is going to rise, so most of the statue will be submerged underwater. We will be lucky if the waves aren't high enough to reach this platform."

The archer sighed and looked down.

"So then... we're dead?"

Sunny smiled darkly.

"Don't worry. Stone doesn't conduct electricity too well, so we will be safe from lightning. Most likely. What you should really be afraid of are the things that all that commotion might attract."

After that, he bent over in another fit of painful coughing.

'Ugh... that stings a little...'

By that time, Nephis was done healing Effie. Walking over, she kneeled and looked at Sunny.

...Unexpectedly, there was an expression of sincere worry on her face.

"You... did you inhale that pollen?"

Sunny tried to grin, but ended up coughing up more blood instead.

"Yeah. A little. But don't fret, it's not... there are no flowers growing in my lungs. Anymore."

Neph's face twitched, and she outstretched her hands to place them on Sunny's chest. However, he caught them in the air with his own and stopped her.

Her skin was soft and cool to the touch.

"Don't bother. I'll be fine. Take a look at Cassie instead."

Changing Star stared at him for a few moments. Then, she suddenly asked:

"But doesn't it hurt?"

He pushed her hands away and shook his head.

"Not as bad as it going to hurt you."

Nephis frowned.

"...I am used to it."

Sunny looked at her for a long time, his expression hard to read. Then, he said evenly:

"I know. But I don't want you to be used to it. You shouldn't be. Especially not on my account."

The weight of the things he left unsaid hung between them for a few moments. Nephis tilted her head slightly, then turned away. Finally, she sighed, lingered for a few seconds, and walked away without saying another word.

Sunny lowered his head and remained motionless for a while.

'Better... it's better this way.'

Being afraid of pain was the most human emotion there was. He couldn't help but feel that every time Nephis silently endured the terrifying torture of her Flaw, a part of her humanity was burned away by the merciless purity of the radiant white flames. He didn't want to see it happen.

Not to mention that he was the last person in the world that Changing Star should have been helping. Because...

Suddenly, a deafening thunderclap rolled over them, forcing the members of the cohort to flinch. The light of day dimmed, and the cold wind furiously crashed into them, bearing drops of salty black water with it.

Done checking up on Cassie, Nephis glanced forward and scowled.

They were almost out of time.

"Get ready! Hold!"

With that, she summoned her sword and held it with both hands. As the incandescent light ignited the silver blade, Changing Star thrust the sword deep into the stone, melting it. Kneeling down, she gripped the sword and prepared for the onslaught of the storm.

But he side, Effie sighed and grabbed onto a crack in the stone with one hand. With the other, she drew Cassie close and hugged her.

Caster followed their leader's example and used his enchanted jian to anchor himself to the platform.

Sunny glanced at them and grimaced.

Standing above him, the Stone Saint discarded her shield and lowered one shoulder, preparing to withstand the hurricane winds. Without anything better to hold onto, Sunny hugged the thigh of his Shadow on closed his eyes, embarrassed by the indignity.

Before he could really revel in it, though, something plopped on the ground near him. Opening one eye, Sunny was surprised to see Kai.

"...What? What are you doing here?"

The archer smiled with embarrassment and coughed.

"Uh... well, you see. I don't have a sword that can cut stone or herculean strength. So, ah... mind if I hold onto the other thigh of your beautiful stone companion?"

Sunny glared at him for a couple of seconds and then scoffed.

"Fine! Whatever. Just don't grab onto me by mistake..."

As the endless wall of darkness approached, the headless colossus steadily walked forward and then dove straight into the furious embrace of the harrowing storm.

Chapter 238: Into the Storm

A stray drop of rain fell on Sunny's cheek. The howling of the wind grew louder. A moment later, the whole world suddenly darkened, and he was assaulted by a furious gale. The water pelted him in the face, drowning the curse Sunny was about to yell.

'D—damn!'

The storm descended on them with terrifying violence. The corpses of repulsive locusts that were left on the platform suddenly moved. Then, picked up by the wind, they were thrown off the neck of the steadily walking colossus, disappearing into the darkness. Their black blood was washed away by the torrent of rain.

A blinding flash of lightning pierced the veil of clouds, followed by a deafening thunderclap.

As the stone became slippery and wet, Sunny felt his body being forcefully pushed away from its surface by the gale. Gripping the Stone Saint tighter, he gasped and grimaced. Pain pierced his damaged lungs.

'Worst... worst amusement ride ever...'

Fortunately, the heavy Shadow was not moved by the tremendous pressure of the hurricane. Firmly planting herself on the surface of the platform, she turned her torso and lowered a shoulder, cutting the wind with her solid stone body.

To her side, Nephis, Caster, and Effie were desperately holding on against the assault of the hurricane. With some effort, they were also able to resist it.

But the worst was still to come.

Hidden from the sun, the dark sea was rising from the depths. Sunny could hear the deep rumbling of the black water rushing through the twisting

passages of the Labyrinth and washing over the mounds of crimson coral. Soon, the stone giant was walking through it, creating a furious whirlpool with each step of his gargantuan feet.

Another lightning tore the skies apart, illuminating the world made of nothing but wind, water, and darkness. Hit by an especially violent gust of wind, the Stone Saint slid a few centimeters back and sent Sunny's heart into a momentary panic.

The stone giant walked forward.

After a while, the black water covered his knees, then his abdomen, then his chest. Following a long and torturous span of time spent holding onto the Shadow and enduring the onslaught of the storm, Sunny saw the raging waves flowing over the broken battlements on the shoulder of the ancient statue.

His face became grim.

During the previous night, the dark sea had not risen high enough to reach the stone platform they were sheltering on. However, with how high the waves were, things were bound to change.

As though answering his thoughts, a massive wave crashed into the neck of the colossus, washing over the platform. The members of the cohort were hit by a wall of blackness and instantly drenched from head to toe in salty seawater.

Luckily, no one was washed away... for now.

The howling wind, the furious onslaught of rain, the constant flashes of lightning and the violent cacophony of thunderclaps were already enough to instill in them the feeling that the whole world was about to split apart and crumble. With the dark waves rising to strike at the stone platform over and over again, the situation became truly disastrous.

And yet, they held on. Minute after minute, against all odds, the six humans clung to the ancient stone, refusing to be taken away by the raging tempest.

Sunny didn't know how much time had passed or how far the stone giant had walked into the depths of the storm, but there was no sign of it growing weaker.

In fact, it was only becoming more ferocious and terrible.

However, this wasn't even what he was really afraid of. His true fear hid not in the skies that had gone mad, but in the lightless depths of the cursed sea.

And soon, inevitably, his worst fears came true.

With a harrowing sense of premonition, Sunny suddenly lowered his head and gazed down, as though trying to see through the mass of ancient stone. Deep beneath them, he felt a gargantuan shadow rising from the depths.

...One of the unspeakable terrors of the dark sea was crawling from whatever abyss that had spawned it to face the marching colossus.

'Curse it all...'

Looking up, Sunny saw Kai desperately clinging to the Stone Saint beside him. For once, the archer did not seem dazzling. He was just wet, pale, and scared out of his wits.

Behind him, Nephis was kneeling on the stones, gripping the hilt of her silver sword, her fingers white and bloodless.

Straining his hurting lungs, Sunny yelled:

"Be! Ready! The dwe..."

However, before he could finish, her eyes suddenly grew wide.

Swiftly turning around, Sunny saw a gargantuan tentacle slowly rising from the seething waves. Illuminated by a flash of lightning, it looked like a tall, grotesque black tower. It pierced the skies and froze for a moment, looming over the ancient colossus.

...Feeling his heart skip a bit, Sunny realized that he knew the sight of it. This was the same gigantic black tentacle he saw on his first night on the Forgotten Shore, the one that had effortlessly pulled the enormous monstrous shark under the waves and tore it in halves like a little fish.

The abomination that even Corrupted Nightmare Creatures were afraid of.

...Falling from above, the gargantuan tentacle crashed on the moving statue and coiled itself around its neck.

'Oh no!'

Before Sunny could react, the gigantic tentacle was already wrapped around the neck of the colossus. Its bulbous flesh suddenly contracted, as though trying to strangle the stone giant.

...And pull him beneath the waves.

Without ever slowing down, the ancient statue continued to walk forward. Then, in a roar of falling water, its colossal hand rose from the depths of the cursed sea and grabbed onto the tentacle.

Grasping it in his stone fist, the colossus lingered for a moment... and easily tore the tentacle apart.

Sunny's eyes widened.

One part of the gigantic black tentacle convulsed and slid off the neck of the ancient colossus, falling into the raging waves. The other part stubbornly tried to coil around his arm, but was pushed away by the stone palm and disappeared back into the depths of the cursed sea.

For a few moments, the black water was silent.

'Oh... gods!'

...And then, the whole surface of it suddenly exploded into the skies.

Chapter 239: Clash of Titans

The surface of the cursed sea seethed and boiled, then exploded into the skies. Following the disappearance of the gargantuan tentacle, six others appeared from beneath the black waves. They rose and loomed above the marching colossus like twisted mountains, blocking the clamor of the storm for a fleeting moment.

Sunny gritted his teeth and stared at the terrible image, trying to comprehend the scale of the approaching battle.

How were tiny humans supposed to survive the fight between titans?

A second later, the tentacles collapsed from the skies to assail the stone giant. Because of their size, it seemed as if they were moving in slow motion. However, Sunny knew that it was just an illusion.

Four of the arms of the unseen leviathan submerged back under the water to coil around the legs and the torso of the colossus, while two remaining ones slithered toward his hand.

The ancient statue continued to walk south, seemingly unperturbed by the furious assault of the terrifying dweller of the depths. It batted one of the tentacles away, and allowed the other to wrap around its wrist.

"Hold fast!"

Sunny didn't register whose shout that was, but followed the advice and grabbed onto the Stone Saint even tighter.

'Curse it all!'

In the furious roar of thunder and blinding lightning, the stone giant suddenly staggered and slightly careened to the side. The tentacle that was coiled around his wrist had tensed, trying to pull the hand down.

The power hiding in its black, oily, bulbous flesh was so harrowing that several cracks appeared on the surface of the ancient stone. It almost looked as though the wrist of the colossus was going to snap and explode into a torrent of shards.

Instead, the giant turned his palm and grasped the tentacle, then squeezed it in an obliterating grip.

The tentacle was trying to crush the ancient stone while being crushed in the fist of the stone giant in return. For a few moments, it wasn't clear which creature was more devastatingly powerful. But then the fingers of the colossus slowly submerged into the black flash, sending rivers of dark, fetid blood spilling down into the sea.

Soon, the tentacle was torn to shreds and had to retreat.

However, the other five were already attacking the colossus from below. Sunny couldn't see through the black waters of the cursed sea, but he could vividly imagine two of them coiling around the legs of the ancient statue, two wrapping around its torso, and another one holding down the hand and the mason's hammer.

Whatever the gigantic tentacles were doing seemed to have worked. The pace of the walking statue slowed, as if it had to struggle against an unimaginable weight that was dragging it back. The colossus staggered once more, then suddenly lurched forward, and finally stopped.

'Not good...'

Through the soles of his feet, Sunny could feel the vibrations running through the ancient stone. The giant was trembling, as if straining to move his colossal body with all his strength. The circular platform they were hiding on slowly began to slope to the side, allowing even more waves to wash over it.

The furious storm grew even stronger, as though celebrating the battle between two enormous creatures. The hurricane wind crushed into the cohort, pelting them with rain and seawater. The thunderclaps merged into

one continuous, deafening roar, and the flashes of lightning were surrounding them like a net woven from celestial flame.

Suddenly, the ancient statue shuddered and changed its angle. It was almost as if... as if the colossus was bending his waist and leaning forward.

Sunny's eyes widened. He instinctively understood what was about to happen.

...He wasn't the only one.

As the Stone Saint followed his command and fell to her knees to thrust a hand into a crack in the stone, Nephis screamed:

"We're going under! Hold your breaths!"

'Here we go again!'

In the next second, the colossus leaned forward and dove under the turbulent surface of the waves.

Sunny barely had time to inhale deeply. Then, the cohort was once again in the cold embrace of the cursed sea. Only, unlike the previous day when they had to cross the canyon, this time they were being pulled deep into the void of darkness instead of across it.

Feeling a powerful current rush past him, Sunny held on for his dear life and waited. If he was right about what the colossus was doing, they still had a chance to survive.

As the pressure of the black water grew heavier and the cold of the lightless void seeped into his bones, the circular platform suddenly stopped and swayed lightly. Despite being submerged deep underwater, Sunny could hear a loud, indescribable sound spreading through the vast expanse of the cursed sea.

'Gods, gods!'

Even though he knew that the gods were dead, he couldn't help but call out to them.

But all that answered him was silence.

...Then, finally, the body of the colossus swayed once more, and suddenly began to move up.

With the same speed that they were pulled into the depths, the cohort was now being lifted from the darkness of the cursed sea back into the furious embrace of the storm.

Sunny was barely conscious by the time the shoulders of the colossus broke the surface of the water and the circular platform appeared above the waves. Glancing around, he counted the members of the cohort and made sure that no one was washed away during this harrowing dive.

Then, he steeled himself and turned his head to peer forward.

The ancient giant had not been pulled into the black water by the unseen horror of the depths. Instead, once the gigantic tentacles had proven to be a nuisance, he had simply leaned forward... and scooped the abyssal creature from the bottom of the sea.

And now the colossus was holding it in his hand, rising the leviathan into the raging skies.

Even knowing that gazing upon the true appearance of the horror of the depths was not the safest of ideas, Sunny couldn't help but look.

What he saw made him shiver.

Chapter 240: Gaze of the Unknown

Held in the ancient statue's hand was a gargantuan skull that looked almost like that of a human, but simultaneously vastly different.

Apart from the size, the shape of it was all wrong. If Sunny had to describe what exactly was different about it, he would have trouble putting it into words, but everything about the skull screamed of wrongness, malignity, and evil.

The vile aura it radiated was almost palpable to the touch. Sunny suddenly felt nauseous and weak, as if just looking at the gargantuan skull was seeping the life out of him.

This sensation was somewhat similar to that he had experienced when trying to read the runes describing the Unknown, only magnified by a thousand times.

...The most prominent and obvious difference, though, was that the gargantuan skull had three eye sockets instead of two, the third one situated above the other ones, right in the middle of its forehead. Its canines were also more prominent and heavy than that of a human.

The lower jaw of the skull was missing, and it was from there that the seven gigantic tentacles protruded. Surprisingly, looking at the tentacles themselves did not have the same sickening effect on Sunny.

With a sense of dark astonishment, he realized that the horror of the depths was using the terrible skull as a shell, hiding inside of it like a weak and vulnerable sea creature would... only, of course, nothing weak or vulnerable would have ever survived the corruption of these ancient bones. In fact, he could see the black oily flash bulging from the dark chasms of the skull's three cavernous eye sockets.

In a flash of lightning, Sunny noticed that the tentacles were moving, coiling themselves around the arm of the stone colossus. Three of them

were heavily damaged, but the remaining four were still full of unimaginable power.

Their combined strength was more than enough to shatter the ancient stone.

Despite the fact that his arm was already starting to crack, the colossus seemed indifferent to the devastating embrace of the abyssal creature.

'What... what is he doing?!'

As if answering his question, the dark sea suddenly surged and split apart, releasing the stone giant's other arm from its cold depths. With rivers of black water streaming from it, the hand of the colossus slowly rose, reaching all the way into the raging skies.

The hurricane winds broke against it, powerless to move the arm of the colossus even by a centimeter.

The hammer gripped in his hand was suddenly enveloped in a ghostly blue glow.

...No, it wasn't really a glow. In were arcs of electricity running all over its surface. They were the harbingers of...

Sunny's eyes widened.

In the next moment, a bolt of lightning connected the hammer to the skies. And then another, and another. Dozens of lightnings landed on the stone hammer in short succession, the roar of thunder almost shattering the whole world.

Enveloped in the raging shroud of electricity, the ancient stone heated and turned incandescently bright, emanating a furious orange glow.

For a moment, everything was still.

And then, with the same calm indifference, the colossus brought his burning hammer down and delivered a devastating blow to the abhorrent skull. The

beak of the hammer easily shattered the ancient bone and sank deep into the flesh of the horror hiding within.

Sunny stared, paralyzed by awe.

But in the next moment, he was thrown back by a terrible, ear-piercing, cacophonous wail. That wail was like nothing that a living being should ever have been able to produce, and much louder than even the deafening thunder tearing the raging skies. It came from the dweller of the depth, whose body was deeply wounded by the stone colossus.

Peering at it, Sunny saw a vast wave of dark blood gush from the terrible wound delivered to the abyssal creature. No... not blood. It was something different.

What flowed from the body of the horror of the depths was nothing but pure darkness.

...And the wall of it was heading right for them.

Suddenly, Sunny was overwhelmed by a sense of mortal danger.

'W—what...'

To the rest of the cohort, the darkness spilling from the terror's body must have looked no different from the tenebrous mass of storm clouds that surrounded them, the black surface of the sea, or even the fetid blood of the giant locusts that they had slain earlier.

But Sunny, who could see through any shadow, knew instantly that it was not the same. Because his gaze could not penetrate the lightless, undulating surface of it at all.

Somehow, he was certain that if that darkness touched their bodies, all of them would be done for, doomed to a fate a hundred times worse than death.

The kind of fate he couldn't even conceive of, let alone imagine.

Twisting his body, Sunny opened his mouth and screamed as loud as he could:

"Neph! Light!"

There was no more than a second left before the wave of darkness washed over them. If Changing Star was late even by a moment or wasted time thinking over his words and deciding whether she should listen to him...

But she didn't.

As soon as Nephis heard the unreserved panic in Sunny's voice, she instantly summoned her flames and channeled them into her sword.

A blinding white radiance suddenly enveloped the cohort, pushing the blackness of the storm away. When the wave of true darkness that flowed from the abyssal creature's wound touched the pure light, it simply... ceased to exist, disappearing like a vestige of nightmare in the brightness of the day.

Sunny exhaled and fell to the stones, drained of all strength.

Glancing forward, he saw the ancient colossus remove his hammer and indifferently drop the harrowing giant skull back into the surging waters of the cursed sea. The black tentacles weakly convulsed and unwrapped themselves from his arm, disappearing into the waves a few moments later.

...Without paying them any attention, the ancient statue lowered the hammer and continued its march south.

It was as if nothing had happened.

Sunny gritted his teeth and gathered whatever endurance he had left to grab onto the Stone Saint once again.

The storm was still not over.

However, somehow, it didn't seem as frightening and dangerous anymore.

Indeed, nothing else happened to them. Hours later, the raging winds grew weaker, and the torrent of rain slowly turned into a light drizzle.

The veil of tenebrous clouds was slowly torn apart, and the rays of sunshine shone through the tears.

The storm was over.

Lying on the cold stone surface, Sunny stared at the sky and grimaced.

'Comparatively safe my ass...'

Chapter 241: Halfway | Shadow Slave

As it turned out, the cohort had endured the fury of the heavens for almost an entire day. Before the storm had appeared, the night had still been far away, and now, it was already a new morning.

The colossus was steadily marching south, completely unshaken by his terrifying battle with the abyssal leviathan. Sunny was growing more and more certain that the ancient statue, while brought to a semblance of life by some unknown power, was not truly sentient.

The headless giant was more like an Echo than a living thing, but then even Echoes seemed to possess some remnants of a personality — at least his poor Scavenger had one. Quiet Dancer often behaved like a prudish and cantankerous young woman, too... no matter how strange it was to describe a flying rapier in that way.

Not to mention Shadows, who were much more alive than Sunny felt comfortable admitting.

Compared to all of them, the colossus seemed rather... lifeless.

Just what kind of a being was he?

Sprawled on the ground, Sunny glanced sideways and observed the Stone Saint, who was standing indifferently at the edge of the platform. He wondered what this living statue thought of her strange colossal sibling. Was she in awe of him or didn't care one way or another?

It was hard to tell. But then again, he was not in the mood to think too much right now.

Sunny was truly exhausted and hurting all over. Everyone was, really.

Despite the incredible achievement of surviving the onslaught of two entire tribes of Nightmare Creatures, the storm, and an encounter with an actual

horror of the depths — or rather, because of it — the members of the cohort looked truly pathetic.

Each of them was either laying on the stone surface of the swaying platform or sitting with a lost look on their face. They were all wounded, tired, and wet.

Even Kai had lost his usual luster, and that alone screamed of how rough this recent hardship had been on them. Even when compared to the usual ruthless reality of the Forgotten Shore.

...Well, no matter. They had survived. More than that, if Sunny wasn't wrong, the stone giant had already brought them more than a thousand kilometers to the south. And by the evening, that number was going to double.

A quick way to travel across the Labyrinth, indeed. In two days, they were going to traverse ten times more ground than Sunny, Nephis and Cassie had managed in two months of their bloody journey to the Dark City. And they had only achieved that much thanks to the desperate decision to travel by boat.

Not bad, even if they had to endure a few hours of pure torture and a couple of near-death moments.

...Plus, the speed wasn't the only benefit that riding atop the ancient colossus had brought them.

With a subtly satisfied expression, Sunny listened to his body and smiled. Even without summoning the runes, he knew that he was once again at the same level as he had been before creating the Shadow Saint, and even above it.

But there was no harm in looking, right?

As the shimmering runes appeared in the air in front of him, Sunny found the familiar cluster... and blinked.

Shadow Fragments: [494/1000].

'This is... this is... what?'

Although he knew that the battle against giant locusts and ghastly flowers brought him a bountiful harvest of fragments, he was still astonished to see just how many he had gained. In the short span of time after Cassie had warned them about the coming storm and before the wall of darkness appeared on the horizon, Sunny managed to reap more than one hundred of them.

One hundred and thirty-two, to be exact.

'Incredible!'

Most came from the Blood Flowers. In a direct confrontation, Sunny would have never been able to kill that many, but yesterday, all he had to do was cause their hosts to plummet to the ground and let gravity do the rest. Between those sent to their deaths by the Prowling Thorn and those he had cut down with the Midnight Shard, about two dozen abominations had died by his hand.

...And another one by his blood, but Sunny didn't want to even think about that experience, ever again.

Each of the ghastly flowers was an awakened monster, bringing him four fragments per kill. With the addition of a dozen or so locusts slain by the Stone Saint, Sunny ended up with this mind-boggling windfall.

Not only did he return to his peak form, but he was now stronger by just shy of a hundred shadow fragments.

'All in a day's work...'

Still stunned, Sunny couldn't help but shake his head. If this continued, he was going to come close to fully saturating his Shadow Core by the end of this expedition.

...Which was one of the reasons he had joined it in the first place, but before today, his ambitious plans had been just a conjecture.

Now, they were becoming reality.

By accumulating a thousand fragments and saturating his core, Sunny was also going to learn yet another secret of his divine Aspect. What exactly was going to happen once the runes showed "Shadow Fragments: [1000/1000]"?

He was now almost halfway to finding out.

But even that wasn't all.

Looking at another cluster of runes, Sunny read:

Memories: [Silver Bell], [Puppeteer's Shroud], [Midnight Shard], [Ordinary Rock], [Prowling Thorn], [Endless Spring]...

And right after that, two new sets glimmered in the air:

...[Blood Blossom], [Dark Wing.]

'Two new Memories. Jackpot!'

The only thing that slightly ruined his exhilaration was the fact that, recently, Sunny was having trouble finding Memories that were actually useful to him. Of course, the Stone Saint had a ferocious appetite and could consume anything that he wasn't going to incorporate into his arsenal.

But simply feeding his spoils to the Shadow, while rewarding in its own way, was not as pleasant as acquiring a new powerful tool.

With a sense of cautious anticipation, Sunny concentrated on the new Memories.

'Well... let's take a look. Maybe it's something useful after all.'

Chapter 242: New Toys | Shadow Slave

Sunny decided to take a look at the Dark Wing first.

'Let's see what my Shadow brought me.'

He looked at the glimmering runes.

Memory: [Dark Wing].

Memory Rank: Awakened.

Memory Tier: I.

Memory Type: Garment.

Memory Description: [This cloak is as light as a dragonfly's wing... and as durable.]

Sunny stared at the description, his eyes twitching.

'Cloak? Another damn cloak?! And what does the Spell mean, as durable as a bug's wing? Those aren't durable at all!'

Taking a deep breath, he calmed himself down and read at the runes again.

'Well... maybe it has an incredible enchantment.'

Memory Enchantments: [Glide].

Enchantment Description: [Allows one to levitate slightly above the ground and slowly move in any direction, or glide down softly from any height.]

Sunny frowned slightly, thinking about whether that Memory could be useful. Then, he dove into the Soul Sea and summoned the sphere of light containing the Dark Wing to take a look at its spellweave.

The descriptions provided by the Spell were not always very informative. It was better to study the thing himself.

At first glance, the ability to fly was nothing short of incredible. Amazing, even! Sunny had heard that there were Memories that gave their owners literal wings, but never expected to encounter one before becoming an Awakened, or even a Master. However, their usefulness differed from case to case.

There were questions of height, speed, and control. No Memory could have given someone the ability to fly as fast and as unrestrained as Kai could. But some came close...

However, as far as these Memories went, Dark Wing turned out to be of the lowest standard. It seemed that it only allowed a person to levitate or hover a couple of meters above ground and move with a very, very modest speed.

Sunny could achieve pretty much everything that such an ability provided with the help of the Prowling Thorn and its invisible string — and do it better, too. Of course, he couldn't fight while using the kunai to swing around on the string. In that regard, this new Memory was better.

However, after imagining himself fighting while using the Dark Wing to hover above ground or even worse glide in the sky, Sunny shuddered.

The beautiful transparent cloak indeed looked like a pair of dragonfly's wings. It was extremely thin and brittle. The slightest strike would rip it apart, causing the wielder to plummet down. So, unless Sunny wanted to die, using this Memory in a battle was out of the question.

In short, it had little utility value compared to the Prowling Thorn and couldn't be used for aerial fights.

Sunny glanced at the Stone Saint.

'Should I feed it to her?'

But after thinking about it for a couple more seconds, he shook his head.

No, despite all its flaws, the Dark Wing was still a real boon. The ability to glide alone was priceless. With it, he did not need to be afraid of falling down from deadly heights.

Like from the height of an ancient walking colossus, for example.

'...I'm keeping it.'

The thing would only give his Shadow one fragment, anyway.

Looking up, Sunny noticed a transparent cloak that looked like a pair of dragonfly wings suddenly appear on Cassie's shoulders. The sunlight refracted through it, making the wings glimmer slightly with all the colors of the rainbow.

With an expression of wonder on her face, the blind girl made the wings move. A moment later, they disappeared into a blur, and Cassie suddenly hovered a few centimeters above the ground. She giggled.

...So, the Quiet Dancer had earned her the same Memory his Shadow had earned him. This was good. While the weak levitation ability was mostly useless to Sunny, to the blind girl, it would be of tremendous help. The terrain of the Forgotten Shore was often uneven and treacherous, so being able to float above it was a true gift for someone who could not see.

Sunny smiled softly and looked away.

'It's nice that she still knows how to laugh.'

A moment later, his expression darkened. Closing his eyes, Sunny sighed heavily and turned his attention to the second Memory he had gotten.

'Don't think about it.'

Memory: [Blood Blossom.]

Memory Rank: Awakened.

Memory Tier: II.

Memory Type: Charm.

Sunny's heart skipped a bit. Charms were a rare type of Memories that took the form of a small accessory — most often an amulet or a talisman. Unlike weapons, armor and tools, they obviously had no practical value. However, charms made up for it by possessing unique and powerful enchantments.

Among the elite Awakened, these were the Memories everyone hunted for the most.

...And now he got one!

'Please be good, please be good...'

Memory Description: [No matter how much blood was spilled, her hunger only grew.]

Sunny blinked.

'...Creepy.'

Memory Enchantments: [Flower of Evil.]

Enchantment Description: [This beautiful charm imbues all Memories and Echoes of its wielder...]

As Sunny read the description, the runes suddenly changed right before his eyes. After a moment, a new one appeared between them:

[This beautiful charm imbues all Memories, Echoes, and Shadows of its wielder with an unquenching thirst for blood. They receive an overall enhancement when used against a bleeding foe, and grow more powerful the more their prey bleeds.]

Not even paying attention to the way the Spell changed the runes on the fly, Sunny froze.

'Aura... it's an aura enchantment.'

Aura enchantments were an extremely rare thing. Unlike the usual enchantments, they affected not only the wielder, but everything that fit their target criteria in a certain radius.

...No need to mention how precious such things were. And Sunny didn't just get an aura charm, but also one that provided a comprehensive augmentation to the power of all — all! — his Memories, Echoes and Shadows, as long as his enemy bled.

And the more they bled, the stronger that augmentation would grow.

"Beautiful..."

Sunny was so stunned that he accidentally whispered that word out loud.

A moment later, he suddenly shuddered and quickly glanced around to make sure that Effie wasn't anywhere near him when he had said it.

To his relief, the huntress was on the opposite side of the platform, working on the map of the Forgotten Shore.

Sunny exhaled and furtively wiped the sweat off his forehead.

'Phew. That was close!'

Then, a wide grin slowly appeared on his face. With a satisfied sigh, he rested his head on the stone and thought:

'Sorry, Saint. Today, you shall remain hungry...'

Chapter 243: Fangs Of A Dragon

By the middle of their second day of traveling through the Labyrinth atop the ancient colossus, an ominous dark line appeared on the horizon. With every minute, it slowly grew closer. Pretty soon, Sunny was able to tell that they were headed toward a vast mountain chain.

The mountains seemed to serve as a border between the Forgotten Shore and the rest of the Dream Realm. They were tall and jagged, piercing the skies like the fangs of a giant dragon. Their distant peaks were covered in pristine white snow and wrapped in a veil of mist that streamed into the ravines and onto the ridges below.

This was the place where the first lord of the Castle had disappeared all those years ago, as well as the goal of their own perilous journey.

As the stone giant came closer to the mountains, Sunny finally understood just how tall, magnificent, and imposing they were. Even the colossus himself looked like a tiny ant in front of these towering peaks. It was hard not to feel small and insignificant in their oppressive shadow.

Slowly, the terrain of the Labyrinth began to rise. The mounds of coral grew smaller, the distance between them increased, until finally there were as much black soil and stone outcroppings visible beneath as there were islands of vivid crimson. Finally, the blades of coral became scarce.

It was as though the Labyrinth was reluctant to approach the foothills of the misty mountains... or simply unable to.

As the gargantuan statue approached the border of the crimson forest, its steps slowed. The colossus seemed to be struggling to move any further. His body was slightly bent, as if he was fighting against strong wind or some invisible force that was relentlessly pulling him back into the Labyrinth.

Even his prodigious might was not enough to defeat the pull of the ancient curse.

Finally, the stone giant staggered and stopped.

This was the moment they were waiting for.

Caster, Effie and Nephis were already climbing down, while Sunny, Cassie and Kai stood at the edge of the circular platform.

Looking down, Sunny sighed and glanced at the charming archer.

"If this doesn't work, you're going to catch me, right?"

Kai raised his elegant eyebrows, then smile at him dazzlingly.

"Why, of course. It would be my pleasure!"

Sunny's eye twitched. Shaking his head, he summoned the Dark Wing and turned away. Immediately, a cloak in the shape of two transparent wings appeared on his back.

If there was one thing calming Sunny down, it was that his shadow was already on the ground. He had sent it down in advance to scout out the landing zone and make sure that nothing was waiting for the members of the cohort below.

The Stone Saint was now standing there, looking like a tiny black dot from the height of the ancient statue's neck.

'No sense in prolonging this.'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny commanded the Dark Wing to raise him above ground... and stepped into emptiness.

For a moment, he was consumed by primal fear. But then Sunny felt that instead of plummeting down to shatter on the rocks, his body was smoothly gliding through the air.

He was still losing altitude, but at a safe and pleasant pace. Two transparent wings had turned into a blur behind his back.

Actually, this feeling was... exhilarating. pan da-nov el ,c`o`m

Trying to keep a wide smile from appearing on his face, Sunny reminded himself how brittle his wings were and tried to control the direction of his descent.

All it took was a slight shift of his posture and a mental command to the Dark Wing. Soon, Sunny was gliding down in a wide spiral, enjoying the feeling of wind whistling in his ears.

'It's a shame that others can't experience this.'

Initially, he was planning to take Effie on the ride of her life. With Kai and Cassie carrying the other two members of the cohort, reaching the ground would have been really easy. However, after a little bit of experimentation, they had found out that Memories left behind by the terrible locusts couldn't carry too much weight.

Even supporting Sunny himself was already close to the Dark Wing's limit.

So he got to enjoy this pleasant feeling of weightlessness all by himself.

After a few minutes of smooth gliding, Sunny softly landed near the Stone Saint and looked up. Kai and Cassie were right behind him, and slightly above, already reaching the knees of the colossus, were the other three members of the cohort.

'...This Memory might be better than I gave it credit for. Still not usable in a battle, but very handy nevertheless.'

Soon, they were all reunited in the shadow of the ancient statue.

A few moments later, the colossus trembled. Slowly, it turned around and took a giant step. The ground trembled as his feet landed on it.

The six humans stood silently, watching the ancient statue walk away. It was heading east, moving parallel to the impregnable wall of the draconian mountains. Sunny suspected that the stone giant had walked all around the Forgotten Shore thousands of times, and now was at the start — or the end — of another loop.

The Stone Saint was watching the headless giant walk away, too. Sunny glanced at her, wondering once again if his Shadow felt something toward this enormous creature.

He got a strange sensation that she did.

PA NDA - N OV EL , C`o`m However, it wasn't awe as Sunny had suspected. If anything, the hint of emotion hiding deep in the ruby eyes of the Stone Saint was that of... disdain.

'...Curious.'

Back at the ruined cathedral, Sunny had noticed that the Black Knight's armor bore a visible resemblance to that of his taciturn Shadow. However, it didn't seem as though both came from the same source. It was more like the armor of the Fallen Devil was derived from that of the living statues.

Almost as if someone had tried to replicate their armaments, but only managed to create a lesser facsimile.

Was the stone giant the same? A failed attempt at repeating the same miraculous act of creation that had put a spark of true life into the Stone Saint and her brethren?

There was no way to know. But still, Suny couldn't help but wonder...

Soon, the ground stopped trembling and the figure of the mechanically marching colossus disappeared into the grey fog. A few moments later, Nephis sighed at turned around to face the mountains.

It was time to find a place to spend the night.

Tomorrow morning, they were going to start their search for the lost expedition.

Chapter 244: Death Zone | Shadow Slave

This high into the foothills of the mountains, they didn't have to look long for a suitable shelter. In fact, they could have simply camped in the open.

The dark sea couldn't get to them anymore.

As the night descended and enveloped the world in the familiar veil of absolute darkness, Sunny volunteered to be the first one to stand watch. Gazing down the sloping surface of the rocky ground, he watched as the black water slowly rose from the distant crimson forest of the Labyrinth.

It crawled up the steep slope of the foothills, straining to devour as much of them as it could, but then stopped hundreds of meters away from the place where the cohort had made their camp and swayed gently, unable to move any further.

Just like the headless colossus had not been able to.

Looking at the powerless waves, Sunny finally allowed himself to believe that they were now outside of the Forgotten Shore.

Or, more precisely, at the very edge of it. In any case, the cursed sea was no longer a threat to them.

'How strange.'

Sunny had grown accustomed to living in the constant fear of this transient abyss. Even in the Dark City, he was constantly aware of its oppressive presence. No one was free of the frightening thoughts about what would happen if the seemingly unassailable wall of the city finally gave in and fell, opening the way to the flood of darkness.

But now, they were safe from it.

...For now.

With a sigh, Sunny summoned the Blood Blossom. An intricate pendant in the shape of a beautiful red flower soon appeared, hanging on a black thread around his neck. He admired it for a few short moments, and then hid the charm under his armor.

It was better to be safe than sorry. Relaxing now was not the brightest of ideas.

Yes, the dangers of the dark sea were now behind them. But he was ready to bet that actually escaping the clutches of the Forgotten Shore was not going to be that easy.

And who said that the place beyond this desolate hell was any better? With his luck, it was only going to be worse.

Consumed in thought, Sunny stared at the dark sea and waited.

In the morning, the members of the cohort prepared to start the search. But before they could get to it, Nephis suddenly stopped them and peered at the towering peaks that loomed above in a veil of mist.

There was a dark expression on her face.

After a while, Changing Star suddenly kneeled and picked up a large rock. Straining her muscles, she crushed it in her fist and then looked at the shards with an inquisitive look.

Finally, she threw the shattered pieces away and sighed.

A few seconds later, Nephis spoke in a heavy tone:

"...I know where we are."

What was that supposed to mean?

Echoing his thought, Effie scoffed.

"We all know where we are, princess. The southern edge of the Forgotten Shore, about two thousand kilometers away from the Dark City. No?"

Nephis shook her head and stood up.

"I mean I know where we are in the Dream Realm."

Everyone froze.

"What... what did you just say?"

The members of the cohort stared at her with their eyes opened wide. The words Changing Star had said hit them like a bolt of lightning.

She pointed at the draconian peaks and said, her voice even: ~~pan da-nov el ,c`o`m~~

"We are north of the Hollow Mountains. I am sure of it."

'Hollow... mountains?'

The name rang a bell, but Sunny couldn't quite put his finger on where exactly he had heard it. Glancing at the other members of the cohort, he noticed that everyone shared the same expression — except for Caster, who seemed to know something. His face grew pale.

Nephis lingered for a few moments, and then explained:

"Human sphere of influence in the Dream Realms is not very large, but it has been slowly expanding for the last thirty years. There are three great Citadels, the most prosperous of which, Bastion, is ruled by the noble scions of the Valor clan. And numerous lesser ones."

Then, she grimaced.

"For a time, the allies and vassals of Clan Valor used to conquer one lesser Citadel after another, expanding human territory far into the north. But then their expansion in that direction stalled. Because they encountered Hollow Mountains."

'Oh... right. I think I heard that from teacher Julius. The northern border of the human territory is a wild place.'

Sunny frowned.

"Are these... Hollow Mountains very dangerous?"

Changing Star gritted her teeth.

"As dangerous as it gets. Actually, beyond that. The mountain chain stretches for thousands of kilometers, forming a whole region of its own. It is marked as a death zone. Even Saints don't come back from there alive."

Sunny shivered. Death zones were regions of the Dream Realm populated by Nightmare Creatures of the three highest ranks — Great, Cursed, and Unholy.

Since no human had survived the Fourth Nightmare yet, facing even the weakest of them was a death sentence to anyone below the Saint rank, and even Saints had only a slight chance of prevailing against a Great creature... let alone a Cursed one.

Somehow, Sunny managed to become one of the few people alive to slay a Great Devil. But he had only survived that encounter by pure luck — if not for his weird trait of possessing a Shadow Core instead of a Soul Core, the unborn spawn of the Vile Thieving Bird would have stolen his life force and killed him on the spot.

...And if Nephis was right, the Hollow Mountains were populated by many creatures of that caliber and higher.

Sunny sighed.

"So what you're telling us is that this place is even worse than the Forgotten Shore?"

Without having to say anything, Nephis simply nodded.

He smiled.

"Figures."

He had been right after all. Escaping the Forgotten Shore was simply impossible.

The only way out lay in the cursed Crimson Spire, and that...

That was where they were headed, whether he wanted to or not.

With a dark expression on his face, Sunny stared at the jagged peaks of the Hollow Mountains and said:

PA NDA - N OV EL , C`o`m "So... we are going there?"

Nephis lingered for a few moments, and then answered calmly:

"Let's hope not. We only need to get as far as the First Lord had gotten. That... that should be close to where we are right now."

Sunny looked at her and nodded.

"In that case, let's not waste any time. The sooner we return into the Labyrinth, the better."

'Gee. I never thought I would be impatient to return to that damned hellhole. You just never know what the future holds, huh?'

Chapter 245: Theatre of Giants

Armed with the understanding of just how dangerous the beautiful mountains towering above them were, the cohort set out deeper into the foothills. Because they didn't know much about the area and what type of creatures populated it, they decided to stay together.

While it would have been much easier to send Kai to take a look around from above, no one wanted to take this risk. As the result, the six humans moved in a tight group, much like they had on the narrow streets of the Dark City and in the Labyrinth.

...However, the landscape around them was vastly different. There were no growths of crimson coral covering the ground, just grass and outcroppings of grey rock. It almost felt like they were back on Earth.

Strangely, that made Sunny feel uncomfortable. Looking around, he could see far in every direction, with no walls of coral or ancient, ruined buildings obscuring his view. That made it harder for the Nightmare Creatures to ambush the cohort, but also impossible for the cohort to hide from anything that could have been watching.

'That is true, but... where are all the monsters?'

Indeed, no matter how hard Sunny looked, he couldn't see any movement whatsoever. It was as if the entire area was completely dead. They were surrounded by complete silence, which was broken only when a member of the cohort made a sound.

The picturesque scenery could have been peaceful, but felt eerie instead. Even Sunny's shadow seemed uncharacteristically listless.

Full of unease, they continued to move forward.

The plan was very simple. Because of Cassie's vision, they knew that the First Lord and his companions had traveled to the mountains the same way

that they did, or at least followed the same route. That meant that both cohorts entered the foothills at approximately the same spot.

The other thing Cassie had told them was that they were searching for a vast pit in the stone. It was hard to miss something like that, so all they had to do was to move deeper into the foothills and look around.

The ground beneath their feet gently sloped upward. As time passed, it grew more and more rocky, and the incline became rather steep. Soon, they were surrounded by tall boulders and had to walk on bare stone.

At some point, Sunny looked back and was surprised to realize how high above the labyrinth they had climbed. By now, it was far away and below them, looking like a vast crimson sea.

A strange sensation settled in his heart. With a bit of introspection, Sunny realized that it was something he had lost a long time ago.

The feeling of being connected to the rest of humanity.

Even though all of them understood that crossing the Hollow Mountains was an impossible task, simply knowing where they were in relation to the rest of the Awakened made all the difference.

They might have been just as stranded as they had been before... but at least they weren't lost anymore.

'What a nice, but useless thought.'

With a sigh, he turned around and hurried to catch up with the rest of the cohort.

The sun was still high in the sky when they found the pit Cassie had described. It was situated in a valley just at the point where the foothills turned into proper mountains, and turned out to be something different from what everyone had imagined.

Disturbingly, throughout the whole day, they had not met a single living thing. In any other circumstances, Sunny would have been glad because of

this strange lack of Nightmare Creatures, but now it was just making him nervous.

Standing at the edge of it, he looked down with a feeling of awe.

Cut into the flesh of the mountains, a vast quarry lay below them. Despite its incredible scale, it was clearly made by humans. A road clinging to the slope of the circular pit led to the bottom of it, wide enough for ten carriages to ride side by side.

At the far end of the quarry, the grey slope of the mountain was cut and hollowed, creating something that resembled either colossal steps or seats of an amphitheater built for giants. Here and there, massive blocks of stone stood, as though ready to be transported back to the ancient city.

Sunny studied the monolithic blocks of grey stone, then the size of the deep quarry. Something connected in his mind.

'So... so this is where the materials for the mighty wall of the Dark City had come from.'

He was certain of it. To think that the ancient inhabitants of the Forgotten Shore had transported all that stone from this far away... the thought of it was nothing short of humbling.

Effie, meanwhile, was staring at something with a tense look on her face. Suddenly, she pointed to the center of the deep quarry and said:

"Over there, look."

Following her gaze, Sunny strained his eyes. For a couple of moments, he couldn't understand what the huntress was talking about, but then his heart skipped a bit.

At the bottom of the quarry, there was a giant Nightmare Creature.

The abomination was enormous, easily twice the size of the Carapace Demon... who had already been as tall as a house. It looked like a strange insect, somewhat resembling a weird mix of a rhinoceros beetle and a

praying mantis, with a smooth carapace, massive horn, and deadly blades attached to the joints of its limbs.

The whole creature seemed to be made out of stone and was the same color as the floor of the quarry. In fact, if not for Effie's warning, Sunny might have not even noticed it.

...That flesh, however, was broken and shattered, lying in piles on the ground.

The giant stone demon was dead.

And from the looks of it, it died by a human hand.

Sunny turned to Nephis and hesitated for a moment.

"What do you think? Those are sword cuts, aren't they?"

Changing Star was silent for a bit, and then said in a dark tone:

"It's hard to tell. We'll need to get closer to take a proper look."

Chapter 246: Irrefutable Proof | Shadow Slave

Ready for the worst, the cohort summoned their weapons and slowly moved down the wide road that lead to the bottom of the quarry. From reaching the foothills of the Hollow Mountains till now, they had not met a single Nightmare Creature... but that was not a reason to lower their guard.

Walking on the ancient path, all of them couldn't help but steal glances at the corpse of the giant stone demon, as though expecting it to come back to life and attack them at any moment.

If living on the Forgotten Shore had taught him anything, it was to always expect the worst.

Some time later, Effie spoke:

"See those deep fractures on the floor of the quarry? I think that this thing had burrowed from below. So watch your step."

Remembering his encounter with the Rolling Stone, Sunny looked down with a sour expression. That clumsy creature was more funny than dangerous, but only because its teeth were vastly outclassed by the Puppeteer's Shroud. If something with more bite were to ambush them from below, who knew what was going to happen?

With a simple thought, Sunny summoned the Stone Saint and ordered her to keep close. The taciturn monster stared at the tall peaks of the Hollow Mountains for a few moments, as though subtly affected by the sight of them. Then, she lowered her head and silently followed his command.

After tense and exhausting half an hour of descending into the deep pit, the cohort finally got close to the remains of the giant stone insect. Cautiously stopping a few dozen meters away from it, they hesitated, not sure how to proceed.

Finally, Nephis sighed and walked forward, approaching the shattered body of the dead demon. If that was what it had been... or was.

As their leader came close enough to the carcass to touch it with her hand, all of them held their breaths.

A few seconds went by, then a few more. Nothing jumped at Changing Star from below the stones. The giant creature had not moved, nor had it shown any signs of coming back to life. The demon just lay there, its body shattered and broken, terrifying even in death.

And it indeed was truly, really dead.

Glancing at the indifferent Saint, Sunny let out a sigh of relief.

Even though he was prepared for a tough battle, he hoped that this time, they would be able to avoid it. The members of the cohort had yet to fully recover from the harrowing journey atop the walking colossus, so they weren't in the best of shapes.

Well, at least Sunny was not, partially because he had refused Neph's offer to vanquish his wounds with her purifying flame. They were healing fast thanks to the Blood Weave and the five hundred shadow fragment... almost... that he had accumulated, but his body was yet to fully recover.

Turning her head, Nephis looked at them and said:

"Come closer."

Encouraged by her words, the members of the cohort finally put their caution to rest and walked over to the dead creature.

Of course, they were still prepared to instantly react in case something unexpected happened.

The six of them spent a few minutes studying the remains to determine whether the terrible creature was killed by a human or something of its own kind.

Sunny glanced at the tall mountains and spent a few seconds watching as the white mist rolled down from their peaks, flowing down the jagged slopes like a waterfall made of clouds.

'...How beautiful.'

With a sigh, he turned away from the wall of mist that was still some distance away from the valley where the quarry was situated and concentrated on the corpse of the stone demon.

Whatever had killed it was not something Sunny would wish to meet in a battle. The flesh of the creature was, indeed, made of stone. That had not stopped the fearsome attackers, however. The carapace of the giant granite abomination was shattered in many places, and melted in others.

...But mostly, it was cut and pierced.

Apart from a few enormous wounds, there were numerous smaller ones, many of them looking as though they could have come from a sword, an axe, or a spear. And yet, he wasn't sure. Sunny was not really an expert in such things.

However, he was an expert in all things having to do with greed and avarice.

Instead of focusing on the nature of the damage done to the giant abomination, Sunny walked around and found its abdomen, which was damaged especially severely. With a reluctant sigh, he climbed atop the stone corpse... and then inside of it.

The other members of the cohort stared at him with expressions ranging from surprise to revulsion.

A couple of minutes later, Sunny climbed out of the dead demon and shook off stone dust from his armor and hair. Then, he glanced at his companions and frowned.

"What?"

Kai stared at him with a complicated expression, and then asked:

"Sunny? Ah, do you want to tell us something?"

Sunny gave him a nod and grinned.

"I do, actually. This thing was indeed killed by a human."

The charming archer raised an eyebrow and asked in a dubious tone:

"Really? How do you know?"

Sunny jumped down and shrugged.

"The Soul Shards are missing."

A few moments later, an expression of understanding appeared on Kai's face.

Indeed, most Nightmare Creatures had no use for the soul shards. Just like humans, who directly absorbed soul essence after killing one of their own kind, they fed from the kill itself as opposed to the act of retrieving and crushing the remnants of broken soul cores.

...If they weren't bizarre terrors like the Soul Devourer, of course. But the chances of encountering another one of those here were rather low.

It was reasonable to assume that the soul shards were removed by humans.

His discovery was solid enough proof of the fact that it was indeed the First Lord's cohort that had battled and slain the terrifying creature.

They had really found the signs of the lost expedition.

But there was another proof for this conclusion, this one irrefutable.

Nephis, who had wandered away from the remains of the demon at some point, suddenly called them over.

The members of the cohort glanced at each other, then slowly approached her, trying to understand what was it that she had found.

Changing Star was standing near one of the piles of rocks that were littering the ground around the body of the dead creature, looking at it with a solemn expression. Most of them came from its shattered carapace, while some were created because the floor of the quarry was broken apart and churned during the ferocious battle.

Why was Nephis so interested in that one in particular?

Looking closer, Sunny suddenly realized that this pile of rocks was different from all others. It was lower, roughly oval in shape, its contour too perfect to be the result of a pure coincidence.

It seemed as though each rock was painstakingly placed here by a human hand, perhaps in hopes to make the pile as orderly and sturdy as possible.

Suddenly, a cold shiver ran down Sunny's spine. He finally realized what he was looking at.

This was not really a pile of rocks.

It was a grave.

Chapter 247: The Mist | Shadow Slave

Standing around the cairn, the members of the cohort looked at it with somber expressions — except for Cassie, who turned away and faced the mountainside, as though trying to hide her emotions.

Now that they knew what they were looking at, their mood suddenly became forlorn and solemn. People stranded on the Forgotten Shore were well acquainted with death and tragedy, but finding this lonely grave so far away from any place where another human could find it, lost under the alien grey sky of the Dream Realm, was still a poignant revelation.

None of them had ever met the Dreamers of the first cohort, but after living in the shadow of their legendary achievements and hearing stories of their deeds for so long, it felt as though this grave belonged to one of their own.

Because of how bleak and tense the reality of the Bright Castle was, it was easy to forget that in this cursed world, all of them were fellow humans. But in front of the quiet grave, the truth was stark and cutting: it was them alone against the endless tide of Nightmare Creatures, and every human life lost diminished them all.

Sunny sighed and noticed that there were words carved into one of the stones placed on top of the cairn. It took him a while to make sense of the inscription, because it wasn't written with the runes he had grown accustomed to. Instead, it was written in simple letters of the human language, which looked strange and alien in this forsaken land.

Cut into the stone by unknown means, a single sentence was left behind on the otherwise unmarked grave.

"Her nightmare is over"

With a heavy heart, Sunny silently repeated it several times. It was strange how much meaning could be expressed with so few words. They echoed in his mind and lingered there, leaving a deep and mournful mark.

'...Rest in peace, whoever you are. I... I hope that your dreams are sweet and serene now.'

With that, he turned away and gritted his teeth.

When would their own nightmares be over?

The other members of the cohort were slowly coming back from their sudden reverie. Kai sighed and looked at Changing Star, his face full of sadness.

"I guess... I guess this is what we've been looking for. The First Lord and his expedition definitely passed this way. But what now?"

Nephis threw a last glance at the grave and turned to face the charming archer.

"There should be an entrance to an old mine somewhere nearby. From what Cassie had seen, this is where they went."

Sunny frowned. Something in what she said made him uneasy. But why?

Turning his head, he looked at Cassie, who was still silently standing a few steps away from them, her head turned to the mountains. It seemed as though the blind girl was enjoying the sight of white mist that was flowing down the mountain slope, slowly approaching the valley.

She had been awfully quiet all this time.

With an ominous feeling suddenly gripping his heart, Sunny gestured to Nephis to draw her attention. Changing Star frowned, then followed his gaze and slightly changed in the face.

Walking over to her friend, she carefully placed her hand on the blind girl's shoulder. Instantly, Cassie flinched at turned around, her face pale.

"...Cassie? Did you see something?"

There was an expression of terror written on the blind girl's face. For a few moments, she just breathed heavily, as though trying to control herself. Finally, she spoke, her voice quiet but steady:

"The mist... we must get underground before the mist comes. If not, all of us will die!"

Nephis didn't waste any time questioning Cassie further. Turning around, she shouted:

"Sunny, Night! Find the entrance to the mine, quick!"

A moment later, Kai rose into the air and dashed toward the giant amphitheater on the opposite side of the quarry. Sunny did not hesitate, too: his shadow detached from his feet and glided away with startling speed.

Despite the urgency of the situation, he remained calm.

'So... I guess there is a reason why we haven't met a single living creature in this place, after all.'

Sunny had expected something like this to happen from the very moment they entered the foothills of the Hollow Mountains. Even before learning about how dangerous these peaks were, he had already known that no land that the crimson coral was incapable of growing on could be safe.

"Caster, Effie! Prepare to move as soon as the scouts find anything!"

Glancing at the white wall of mist that was already starting to seep into the valley, Nephis lingered for a moment, then summoned her sword. Behind her, Cassie rose slightly above the ground and unsheathed the Quiet Dancer, holding the elegant rapier in her left hand.

Two transparent wings turned into a blur behind her back.

Looking at them, Sunny sighed and walked over to stand near the Stone Saint. His mind was preoccupied with perceiving the world through the shadow. Then, he closed his eyes to concentrate on his other senses.

The shadow and Kai found the entrance to the mine almost simultaneously. A tall archway was cut right into the side of the mountain, with false columns carved into the rock around it. The mouth of the tunnel was dark and ominous.

There was a twisting path leading away from the mine into the quarry. Sunny couldn't see where it exited the maze of stone blocks, but was sure that Kai would see it from above.

Opening his eyes, he noticed that the wall of mist was now looming above them, mere seconds from falling down into the quarry, and said:

"Follow me!"

With that, he ran toward the general direction of where the mine was situated. The others ran behind him, exerting as much speed as they could manage — except for Caster, of course.

Halfway to the wall of the quarry, Kai landed near them and gestured to a barely visible opening between the stone steps.

"There! Hurry!"

They entered the hidden path and ran as fast as they could, soon approaching the wide tunnel.

At the very edge of darkness, Sunny stopped for a second and looked back at the swiftly approaching wall of mist.

As he gazed into the milky fog, a cold and heavy feeling of dread suddenly grasped his heart.

Not wasting any more time, he turned around and dove into the shadows.

A few moments later, the mist swirled around the entrance of the tunnel and devoured the rest of the world.

Chapter 248: Those Who Survived

Leaving the mouth of the tunnel and the swirling white mist behind, the cohort cautiously went further into the darkness. As they walked, they summoned the Memories that produced light to illuminate the way.

The tunnel leading into the mine was wide and spacious. Despite the ruthless flow of time, it had remained in perfect condition — just like the ancient wall that surrounded the Dark City. The floor was inclined and led down, deep into the belly of the mountain.

Sunny sighed, not happy with the idea that they had to travel further into this deadly region of the Dream Realm. Who knew what horrors lived in the darkness at the roots of the Hollow Mountains? The only thing that consoled him was that, with some luck, the cohort wouldn't have to go too far.

They just had to find the remains of the doomed expedition that had disappeared somewhere down below. He wasn't entirely comfortable hoping that those people had died sooner rather than later, but they were dead either way.

What Sunny cared about the most was for him and his companions to not follow suit.

Walking at the back of the party, he glanced at the five people in front of him.

How did Changing Star's cohort stacked against that of the First Lord? Were they weaker, stronger, or just about the same?

His brow furrowed.

Regarding Nephis herself, he doubted that the young man who had led a group of Sleepers to conquer the Bright Castle could have been more powerful or driven than her, at least not at the start. However, he had much

more time to accumulate power and resources before venturing into the Hollow Mountains to find his death.

Fifteen years ago, when he had entered the Dream Realm and got stranded on the Forgotten Shore, things were much different from now. The Immortal Flame clan was yet to fall, for one. In fact, it was not long after Broken Sword, Neph's father, had become the first human to conquer the Third Nightmare and achieve the rank of Saint.

Would the world be different if the First Lord managed to find the way out and returned to reality? Yes, most likely. If the era of the Nightmare Spell had shown anything to humanity, it was that history was often changed by individuals, as opposed to events and invisible currents. The influence one extraordinary person could exert on history in a time of adversity was hard to deny.

From everything that Sunny knew about the First Lord, a man like him could have done a lot to improve the position humanity was in. What a shame that he had perished in this godforsaken hell, the story of his incredible deeds known only to a handful of people as unfortunate as him.

But how many were there of such brilliant youths, killed before their time by the Nightmare Spell?

In the end, history was not written by the best, but by those who survived.

Glancing at the people walking in front of him, Sunny couldn't help but think:

'How many of us will survive?'

Each member of the cohort was incredibly strong. Just like Nephis was at least an equal to the First Lord, her companions were most likely equal to his.

Because of Effie's light-hearted and carefree demeanor, it was easy to forget how fearsome of a warrior she was. The huntress had not survived three years of stalking monsters on the cursed streets of the Dark City alone by

accident. Hundreds upon hundreds of vicious Nightmare Creatures fell by her hand.

As much as Sunny hated to admit it, Caster was a true powerhouse among the Sleepers, too. His incredible Aspect Ability, outstanding skill, cold intelligence and the wide arsenal of inherited Memories made him a deadly threat to anyone foolish enough to become his enemy.

Kai was not as ferocious of a fighter as the core members of the cohort, but his ability to fly coupled with the mastery of the bow and the Ascended arrow that Sunny had sold him made him a real menace in a battle, too.

Cassie was not much of a fighter, but her gift was arguably more important than any combat Aspect Ability could ever be. Especially so on the Forgotten Shore, where inconceivable dangers lurked under each rock.

...And then there was Sunny himself.

Sunny was, perhaps, the deadliest of them all. If he wanted to, he could have killed every member of the cohort twice over.

With the exception of Nephis himself, of course.

If the two of them had to face each other in battle, he didn't count his chances too high.

...At least for now.

As they walked deeper into the mine, there were more tunnels forking away from the main one. The cohort turned a few times, choosing the path that led further down underground.

Soon, the walls surrounding them changed. More and more, they were decorated with the intricate stone carving that the inhabitants of the ancient city had loved so much.

At first, these carvings were strictly decorative and mostly senseless, shaped into beautiful patterns of lines and simple images. But then, slowly, something about them changed.

Sunny was, perhaps, the only one who paid attention to the carvings. Due to his passion for learning the history of this ancient civilization, he had spent a lot of time doing the same back in the Dark City, where there were a lot of similar things.

He was still planning to clear the floor of the ruined library of rubble and study the vast fresco that was hidden beneath — the project he had been working on before the events of these recent weeks had taken him away.

However, the condition of the carvings back in the ancient city was mostly terrible. The unknown disaster that had wiped out its inhabitants, the passage of time, and the Nightmare Creatures left most of them in ruins.

Here in the remote mine, however, the carvings were preserved in pristine condition.

When Sunny finally saw what was depicted on them, his breath became faster.

The answers to many questions that were tormenting him were right there, carved into these walls.

Chapter 249: Curse of Darkness

Depicted on the ancient engravings, a beautiful land was bathed in sunlight. Lush forests, glistening rivers, and fields of flowers surrounded human cities built of stone. From what Sunny could tell, this was the Forgotten Shore before the mysterious and terrifying curse had turned it into the desolate hell it was today.

In the next mural, the beautiful land rested under the sky that was full of stars. Suddenly, one of them fell to the ground, causing a wave of destruction to wash over the human cities. When people approached the center of the crater left behind by the falling star...

Sunny almost stumbled when he saw the next engraving. In it, a naked human figure was standing at the bottom of the crater, wreathed in light. The inhabitants of the stone cities were surrounding the radiant figure, dressed in archaic garments and armor.

The figure seemed beautiful and pure, as though untouched by the imperfections of the mundane world. What made Sunny lose his composure was not its beauty and not how eerily familiar the soft radiance emanated by its skin was, but...

Its face.

On it, three eyes were burning with pure, incandescent light. Two were just like that of a human, with the third one situated above the other ones, right in the middle of the creature's forehead.

...Just like that of the terrible skull that the walking colossus had shattered with his stone hammer in the middle of a raging storm.

'...What does it mean? What is this thing?'

To Sunny's dismay, the next engraving was heavily damaged. He couldn't discern anything of what was depicted on it.

However, the one after that was in almost perfect condition.

On it, the radiant figure was kneeling on the ground, its chest pierced by the spear of the tallest human among the inhabitants of the beautiful land. What flowed from the terrible wound, however, was not blood, but an endless flood of pure darkness.

'Why... why did they attack it? What happened?'

Left without an answer, Sunny walked forward and soon reached the next mural. He saw darkness devouring the humans gathered around the fatally wounded creature and spread. Soon, it devoured the crater left by the fallen star, too.

And then, it devoured the entire world.

"...The curse of all-consuming darkness," he whispered.

Finally, Sunny got a glimpse at the origin of the terrible disaster that had destroyed this land and turned it into a hellish nightmare. Although the details of it were still unclear, one of the mysteries he had been trying to solve now had an answer.

But the story told by the engravings was not yet over. Walking further into the ancient mine, Sunny learned of what had happened next.

As the darkness spread across the world, it reached the skies. The stars were either devoured by it or fell down, turning the sky into a terrible, lightless abyss.

The starless void.

The sun never rose above the cursed land again, leaving humans trembling in the cold. Soon, horrifying creatures came from the darkness to devour them. The best and the brightest of the ancient civilization took arms to defend their cities, and for a while, they were able to resist the tide of monsters.

...But then, humans themselves started to turn into abominable horrors.

At that point, Sunny felt a cold shiver running down his spine and couldn't help but tremble.

Not because he was affected by the tragic disaster that had befallen these ancient people.

But because it all seemed so terrifyingly familiar.

The details might not have been the same, but the end result was eerily similar to what was happening in the real world right now.

A curse that suddenly appeared and spread across the entire world. The horrible monsters that came from nowhere to attack settlements and devour humans. The champions who had taken charge of defending their kind from the abominable creatures. And the fact that some humans had begun turning into those creatures themselves.

Was it not the same as the Nightmare Spell spreading like a plague across the globe, the Nightmare Creatures coming through the Gates, the Awakened rising to fight against them, and the unfortunate soles who failed their First Nightmare transforming into monstrous abominations?

The only difference was that the story of the civilization of the Forgotten Shore was already over. Eventually, the curse had destroyed it. The people of his own world, however, were still trying to resist such fate.

But was it even possible to defeat fate? The inhabitants of the Forgotten Shore were proud and mighty. They were capable of building cities that stood for thousands of years and fighting against the most terrifying monsters on equal footing. And yet, in the end, they were utterly obliterated and wiped out. Their land had become a cursed desert.

Would the real world turn into a desolate hell like the Forgotten Shore too, one day?

With a dark expression on his face, Sunny turned away from the engraving he was staring at and walked away.

There were a few more left ahead, still.

On one of them, seven heroes came together from different parts of the dark land. Under their protection and guidance, people living in the darkness migrated from their half-destroyed cities and came to the shore of the vast crater. There, they built a new home for themselves, one surrounded by a mighty wall that no monster could scale or breach.

One of the heroes, a man depicted with a mason's hammer in his hand, was in charge of building the wall. Despite the fact that the part of the engraving depicting his face was damaged, it was unmistakably one of the seven founders of the Starlight Legion, the man whose statue had carried them across the Forgotten Shore.

In the second to last engraving, the mighty wall was finished, and the city was prospering amidst the darkness. The seven heroes stood at some distance from it, surrounding...

Sunny's eyes narrowed.

The seven heroes were surrounding an inconceivably tall tower. It loomed above them, connecting heaven and earth like the axis of the world. Despite its cyclopean height, the tower was still unfinished.

The Crimson Spire. Only it was not crimson yet, as there were no growths of cursed coral covering its walls.

On the last engraving, the tower was complete, and on top of it...

On top of it, a new sun was burning bright, bathing the land and the celebrating people in the light once again.

The darkness was gone.

Chapter 250: Defiant Oath | Shadow Slave

Sunny stared at the last engraving for a few moments, and then continued walking.

The revelations he had uncovered on the walls of the ancient mine gave him a lot to think about. The truth that he had been piecing together for a very long time was finally more complete than fragmented.

So, something had indeed fallen from the sky and put a start to the eventual destruction of this land. Sunny had suspected that this was the case for a while now, especially after witnessing the colossal impact crater that was situated between the Dark City and the Ashen Barrow.

At times, he had been almost ready to believe that it was really the result of the Vile Thieving Bird dropping the Weaver's eye "on the mortal realm below", as written in the description of the Lineage Memory he had consumed.

The Thieving Bird had gone mad after looking at the reflection of the - unknown- which was apparently forever frozen in the depths of Weaver's pupil. The madness and corruption that reigned over the Forgotten Shore were similar enough for him to draw a parallel.

However, now he knew that it had been an actual being that had fallen from the skies, wreathed in light and flame. A beautiful figure that emanated brilliant radiance and had three eyes on its terrible, perfect face.

Sunny didn't know what led the ancient humans to attack it, but they had killed the creature — perhaps managing such a feat only because it was already weakened by its fall from the heavens and the events that had sent it plummeting down.

But by doing so, they had unleashed the flood of darkness and caused the destruction of their land.

Sunny was under the impression that the annihilation of the ancient civilization had been instantaneous, but as it turned out, humans had continued to fight against the curse for a long time. Generations, even — that's why the founders of the Starlight Legion were described as being born in the all-consuming darkness.

He didn't know whether the monsters that came to feast on the human flesh had been contained within the body of the fallen being along with the ocean of darkness, or whether they were all humans corrupted by the curse — with those present at the moment of the creature's death becoming the most terrifying ones.

What he did know, however, was that the Starlight Legion had managed to push the monsters back and build an impregnable fortress for the humans under their protection. That fortress would later become the Dark City.

And then, the founders of the Legion had achieved something even more inconceivable. They had built the cyclopean Spire and somehow used it to...

To create an artificial star.

Yes, the sun shining above the Forgotten Shore was not real. It was, in fact, a human creation.

'...Speak about ambition.'

It was hard not to feel awe after learning that those seven madmen had actually managed to create a sun. They had made a defiant oath to return light to the cursed land and gone about it with terrifying resolve and sincerity.

The story depicted in the ancient engravings ended with a celebration. The forces of good had vanquished the curse of darkness and brought a new era of light and prosperity to the inhabitants of the ancient city.

...However, that was not where history ended.

Something happened between then and now that had caused the obliteration of the ancient civilization, the corruption of the Spire, and the appearance of the Crimson Labyrinth.

But what?

That was a mystery for another day. Perhaps he would be able to find the answer to it back at the Dark City.

What Sunny did note, however, was the difference between the dark reality shown in the engravings and the state the Forgotten Shore was now.

Yes, the ancient murals showed a world completely devoid of light, but it was different from the hell that Sunny and the other members of the cohort knew. The engravings did not show the curse of darkness as a literal sea.

With no sun and no sea, there was no cycle of tides that turned the Forgotten Shore into an ocean of black water every night.

The dark sea had appeared at the same time as the Labyrinth, then? Or at least as the result of the same event. Sunny was sure that the two were connected.

But he didn't know what significance that information hid.

...The other thing he had noted was that, while other members of the party were initially indifferent to the ancient engravings, at some that changed.

When they had been walking past the mural depicting the radiant being with three incandescent eyes, Nephis had stopped and looked at it for several long moments.

Then, she turned her head away, lingered for a second, and continued walking.

Sunny had not missed that detail. However, he couldn't even begin to guess what it meant.

Some time later, they entered a wide circular hall. In the center of it, a dark chasm opened into the depths of the mountains, leading so far down that Sunny couldn't even see its bottom.

It looked like the gates of the Underworld.

Thousand years ago, there were wooden ladders and platforms leading down the main shaft of the mine, as well as a system of ropes and pulleys to lower the miners and lift containers full of precious ores up. Of course, all of that had rotten and collapsed a long time ago.

With a sigh, Sunny glanced at Nephis and asked:

"We are climbing down, aren't we?"

Instead of answering, she simply summoned the golden rope and shrugged.

He shook his head.

"Wait. At least give me some time to scout ahead and see if anything is waiting for us at the bottom of this thing."

With that, he sent his shadow down the wall of the endless shaft. The shadow wasn't very ecstatic at the prospect of gliding down into the depths of the scary well, though. Giving Sunny a resentful glare, it sighed and dove down with visible reluctance.

A few minutes later, the shadow reached as far down as the range of Shadow Control allowed. It was still not at the bottom of the mine, but at least there were no primordial horrors in its sight.

Sunny summoned the Dark Wing and gave the members of the cohort a nod.

"We can proceed. Be ready, though. Who knows what might happen?"

Chapter 251: Boundary of the Underworld

Standing on the edge of the bottomless well, Sunny sighed and summoned the Prowling Thorn. Then, he commanded the Dark Wing to come to life and took a step into the emptiness.

The dragonfly wings of his enchanted cloak were too fragile to rely on them alone in a situation that posed unknown risks. It was better to have a backup at hand.

Softly gliding down, he descended in a straight line for a few moments, then made a turn and glanced at the other members of the party.

The golden rope had been thrown into the darkness. Nephis, Effie and Caster were already climbing down, while Kai hovered near them, ready to draw his bow should anything attack the cohort. Cassie was by his side, holding the Quiet Dancer in her hand.

The elegant rapier served as her guide as well as support, allowing the blind girl to make better use of the transparent wings. With it, she was able to zip around with considerable speed or stay in one place without any surface beneath her feet.

'Handy.'

Just like that, the cohort descended to the bottom of the ancient mine. Sunny was gliding down in a wide spiral, sometimes close enough to the wall of the well to touch it with his hand. He was slightly ahead of the rest of the group.

When the distance between them grew too much, he would insert the dagger into a crack in the stone and wait for others, attached to the vertical wall like a strange insect.

His shadow moved further and further down, exploring the darkness below.

Despite the tension that permeated the air, in the end, nothing had attacked the group of descending humans. They discovered the reason for this unexpected respite at the bottom of the mine.

Sunny was the first one to land on solid ground. With other members of the cohort still a few dozen meters away, for some time, he was left in complete darkness.

As soon as he took a step, something crunched under his foot. Looking down, Sunny saw a piece of pale bone.

A few meters away from him, the remains of a giant skeletal creature lay broken on the ground. It resembled a snake with hundreds of tiny claws growing from its belly and a terrifying, round maw. Glancing up, he judged that the length of the dead abomination was enough to coil around the whole shaft of the mine at least several times.

While Sunny was thinking, the other members of the cohort approached the ground. The light of their lantern Memories fell on him, then shone further, revealing the remains of the colossal bone worm.

Exposed by this light, a nimble shadow glided on the stone and attached itself to Sunny's feet.

Nephis was the first one to jump down. Glancing at the repulsive Nightmare Creature, she outstretched one hand and asked:

"Sunny?"

He shook his head.

"It's dead. Nothing is moving out here."

Soon, all of them were on the ground. Gathering around the giant worm, everyone had the same thought:

'Fighting that thing on the vertical wall of the well would have been a true nightmare.'

Sunny didn't know how the members of the lost expedition had managed to defeat the terrifying creature, but was thankful to them. He would not have wanted to test the durability of the Dark Wing if that thing suddenly lunged at him from the dark.

There was a disturbing question now in his mind, however.

If the cohort of the First Lord was strong and capable enough to slay the stone abomination that used to guard the quarry and the worm that lived in the well of the mine...

Then was kind of a horror had killed them all in the end?

With a dark expression on his face, Sunny turned away from the dead creature and walked into the darkness.

Not too far from the corpse of the abominable worm, they stumbled upon an abandoned campsite.

A makeshift firepit was built on the rock floor, with five large stones surrounding it for the humans to sit on. A bit further, a low barricade was constructed out of the rubble, protecting the camp from unwelcomed visitors.

The lost expedition had definitely been here.

Since they had been walking, climbing and running for the better half of the day, the cohort decided to settle for the night and continue the search tomorrow.

Soon, the orange glow of a bonfire chased away the darkness.

It was a bit strange to relax and cook food in the same place where the First Lord and his companions had rested and prepared theirs all those years ago. Sunny felt as though he was touching history.

Or, rather, making it.

However, he didn't have too much time for empty thoughts.

If what Nephis had told him at the start of this expedition was true, tomorrow... tomorrow was going to be his time to shine.

The next day, the cohort ventured further into the tunnels of the ancient mine. No one could tell how deep underground they were exactly, but the feeling of countless tons of stone looming over their heads, ready to come crashing down and bury them under their terrible weight, was not a pleasant one.

They were in the belly of the mountains now.

After several hours of walking through narrow tunnels, Sunny suddenly felt a soft breeze touch his cheeks. A few minutes later, a distant rustle reached his ears.

The deeper they went into the darkness, the louder that rustle became, until finally turning into an easily discernable murmur of running water.

Soon, they reached the dark shore of a wide underground river.

The running water was black as ink, but not in the way that the waves of the cursed sea had been. There was no smell of salt in the air, too. Wisps of mist were rising above the surface of the subterranean river, swirling in the silent darkness.

It looked like a boundary of the Underworld.

There was a stone pillar built on the shore, and tied to it, a beautiful boat made of pale wood swayed gently on the cold black surface of the dark river.

Looking at the graceful boat, Sunny sighed.

It was time to earn his keep.

Chapter 252: Unseen | Shadow Slave

This was the last secret about the fate of the lost expedition that Cassie had gleaned from her visions. But even then, the knowledge she had received was fragmented and incomplete.

All she could tell the members of the cohort was that, once they crossed the dark river and until reaching the next boundary, they had to keep their eyes closed at all cost, no matter what happened. No living thing could see what lay beyond these cold waters and remain... whole.

At least that was what she told them.

Cassie didn't really know herself what would happen if someone failed to follow that rule, but said that she had never felt more terror than in the short moment before the vision showing her the fate of the lost expedition had shattered and everything had grown dark.

This was telling a lot, considering what kinds of horrors the blind girl saw in her vision routinely.

...In any case, this was where Sunny came in.

While looking through the eyes of the shadow was still too dangerous, he could lead the cohort to their destination with the help of his ability to sense space through the shapes of shadows populating it.

At least in theory.

Standing on the shore of the dark river, six humans tied the golden rope around their waists. When everyone was ready, Nephis took out six strips of cloth and a block of wax. Lighting a small white flame on her palm, she sighed and turned to Effie.

"You're first."

The huntress made a complicated face, but then obediently approached their leader.

What followed next looked simultaneously intimate and disturbing. Using her flames to melt the wax, Changing Star gently took Effie's face in her hands and, after the huntress shut her eyes tightly, sealed them with melted wax. Then, she tied the strip of cloth around Effie's head to hold it in place.

One after another, every member of the cohort went through the same procedure. When Sunny's turn came, he shifted slightly when Neph's cool hands touched his cheeks.

A few moments later, he was blind.

'That is... is this how Cassie lives?'

Commanding his shadow to not see anything, Sunny was left in utter darkness. However, he still had it better than the blind girl. His Shadow Sense was still working, at least.

With its help, Sunny could more or less tell what was where. This form of perception was vastly different from sight, but could serve the same purpose in a pinch, be it very poorly. If conditions were right.

Luckily, he had practiced navigating the world with the help of nothing else but Shadow Sense in the past. This was how he had defeated the strange basilisk creature in the Dark City, among other things.

Leading the group of staggering humans to the graceful boat, he helped them to board it and untied the rope holding it in place. Then, Sunny found the oar and pulled on it, propelling the boat across the dark river.

Soon, cold mist shrouded everything around.

The deeper into the mist they sailed, the more it felt like they were leaving one world behind and entering another.

A much darker, much more ancient, much more terrifying world.

No one felt compelled to speak, so the silence was broken only by the murmur of rushing water and the creaking of the wooden oar.

'This is not too bad. Yeah. I am not scared witless, at all.'

Calming himself down with these silly thoughts, Sunny continued to guide the boat.

However, one thing kept making him shiver.

Being surrounded by mist and having to keep his eyes closed, Sunny couldn't help but remember the harrowing encounter with the being that appeared in a veil of fog and tried and lure him into gazing at it using a stolen voice.

...Was this where it came from?

After some time had passed — he couldn't tell how much no matter how hard he tried — Sunny suddenly sensed a solid mass in the distance. This was the opposite shore of the dark river.

Soon, they were drawing near to it.

As the bottom of the boat scraped against stone, Sunny jumped to the pier and tied the rope around the stone pillar. Then, he helped the others disembark.

Turning his head, he sensed another shape swaying on the surface of the water. There was a second boat here, presumably the one First Lord and his companions used to cross.

But unlike Nephis and her cohort, there had not been an oracle in their ranks. No one had warned them to keep their eyes shut.

Maybe this was the reason why none of them had returned.

Turning his back to the river with a strong feeling of unease, Sunny faced the mouth of the tunnel that led deeper underground. Letting out a resentful sigh, he slightly tugged on the golden rope and took a step forward.

The other members of the cohort had no choice but to follow him.

A few seconds later, they disappeared into the tunnel, leaving the shore of the silent river behind.

As soon as Sunny stepped into the tunnel, he felt cold shivers running down his spine. Although he couldn't see anything about it, he could tell that it was different from the ones they had traversed earlier.

This one still felt like it had been cut through the flesh of the mountains by someone — or something — as opposed to being formed by a natural process. However, its creators were unmistakably different from the humans that had created the mine and the quarry outside.

Everything about it was more pronounced, more skillful. The shadows populating the tunnel were different, too.

They were much deeper, much darker. And much, much more... ancient.

Soon, the tunnel turned into a maze of wide passages, all filled with nothing but mist and silence.

'Another maze. Of course it's a maze. Everything in this damn place just has to be a maze...'

Before Sunny could finish the thought, though, he suddenly froze, paralyzed by fear.

Because right in front of them, he felt the presence of a shadow that was different from all the others.

...A human shadow.

Chapter 253: without a Master

The human shadow stood lonesomely in the mist, strangely aloof and motionless. As Sunny pulled on the golden rope to command his companions to stop, it shifted slightly and turned away, then became still once again.

Sunny sensed a cold, dreadful feeling settle in his heart.

The possibility of encountering another human in this dark and terrifying place was already unsettling enough. He did not consider even for a second that one of the members of the lost expedition could have survived down here, in the darkness, for all these years. Not unless they were no longer human.

But even that was not the cause for the coldness and dread he felt.

The real reason had nothing to do with logic and everything to do with his unique Aspect. Because of it, Sunny sensed that there was something terribly, utterly wrong with the shadow.

The feeling he got from it was one of eerie and utter wrongness. However, it didn't seem to be dangerous or hostile. Instead, it felt lost, empty, and... mournful. The shadow was full of sorrow and anguish that he could not describe with words.

Sunny was not that empathetic when it came to humans, but strangely, he couldn't help but share in the suffering of this lonely shadow. Maybe because, in a sense, they were kin.

As he was observing the shadow, unsure what to do, it made a few steps in a random direction and then stopped hesitantly, lingering there without moving. Then, it walked back and froze once again.

It was as though the shadow was lost.

A few moments later, Sunny finally understood the nature of the deep feeling of wrongness he felt in the lonesome shadow. When he did, a cold shiver ran through his entire body.

The reason why this shadow was so strange and eerie was because it wasn't connected to anyone. There was no human casting it. Not anymore, at least.

The human that the shadow had once belonged to was gone, cut from existence by some unknown power. Sunny couldn't sense any bones anywhere, either. It was as if the human had not been killed, but simply... erased.

While the shadow remained to wander aimlessly in the mist for all eternity.

'What a terrible fate...'

But the question remained... what was he supposed to do now? The shadow was in his way. Sunny had to either walk past it or return back and try to find another way through the maze.

But what threat could this pitiful thing pose? It was just a shadow, after all. His own couldn't harm a fly no matter how hard it tried. This one had to be the same.

With a deep sigh, Sunny slowly walked forward. With each step he took, he could sense the lonesome shadow better.

...At some point, it sensed him, too.

Turning to face Sunny, the shadow hesitated for a few moments, then tentatively glided closer. He could feel an outburst of muted emotions radiating from it: surprise, hope... and then, sudden despair.

Realizing that he wasn't its long-lost master, the shadow froze. Its shoulders dropped.

Sensing the deep well of loneliness, anguish and sorrow in front of him, Sunny tilted his head to the side.

Then, following an impulse, he outstretched his hand to the shadow:

'Here... take my hand. You don't have to be alone anymore.'

The shadow trembled, as if it heard his silent invitation. Then, it lingered for a few moments and approached him with uncertainty. Finally, it raised its hand and tentatively placed it in the hand of his own shadow.

A moment later, it disappeared.

Sunny sighed. FREEWEBNOVEL.COM

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Diving into the Soul Sea, he walked along the rows of silent shadows standing on the surface of the tranquil water. And there, just as he had expected, he saw a new one.

A shadow of a graceful young woman was standing among them, as motionless and still as the rest of them. Her anguish, sorrow, and loneliness were gone. The shadow seemed to finally be at peace.

Sunny looked at her for a few moments, his heart heavy. Finally, he said:

"Welcome. Rest now. Your... your nightmare is over."

With that, he left the silent sea and sighed again.

Standing in the darkness with his eyes sealed shut, Sunny remained motionless for some time.

Then, he pulled on the golden rope and led the cohort further into the mist.

Sunny didn't know how long they wandered around the dark maze. More than once, he had ended up at a dead-end and had to search for another path. It was hard to not lose track of all the turns of the twisting tunnels, but he had somehow managed to stay on track.

On the way, he had found three more shadows. Each of them was just like the first one, lost and lonesome.

And just like the first one, they eventually took his hand and were absorbed into his Soul Sea. The four of them — one young woman and three men — now stood silently together, united once again even though their masters were long gone.

...Seeing them together gave Sunny a little solace, no matter how misguided it was.

There were five stones arranged around the fire at the campsite left behind by the lost expedition, hinting that five people had descended into the ancient mine. Four of them had eventually perished in this eerie, dark place.

But no matter how hard Sunny searched, he couldn't find the fifth shadow.

The First Lord himself was not here.

Could it be that he had somehow managed to survive and leave the maze of mist?

At some point, Sunny felt someone pull on the golden rope. Turning around, he walked a few steps back and stopped near Cassie. Feeling his approach, the blind girl raised her hand and pointed at one of the tunnels.

Understanding what she wanted to say, Sunny led the cohort in that direction.

Soon, the sound of rushing water reached his ears.

Some time later, they came to the shore of another subterranean river.

They had reached the second boundary.

Chapter 254: The First Lord

For a moment, Sunny was afraid that they had been walking in circles all this time and now returned exactly to where they had started. But then, he calmed himself down and noted that this river, while as eerie as the one they had crossed on a wooden boat, was rather different.

He couldn't exactly explain it, but it didn't feel the same. Plus, there was no pier with two boats tied to stone pillars anywhere in sight... or rather, sense.

Instead, there was a bridge.

Sunny could feel its shadow falling on the cold water, solid and firm as the stone it was built from. The bridge arched over the river, leading far into the distance.

Not wishing to spend another minute in the terrible maze that no living thing could see if it hoped to remain alive, Sunny led the cohort toward the bridge.

If Cassie was correct, they would be safe after crossing the second river. Sunny surely hoped that it was true, because the long journey where he had to play the role of a guide for five blind people had been nothing short of exhausting.

After spending seven... or was it eight by now?... months on the Forgotten Shore, Sunny had thought that he possessed a high tolerance for terror. But this last ordeal tested the limits of his mental endurance.

Walking through that dark place with his sight taken away...

It was a miracle that Cassie had somehow managed to remain sane at all.

He tensed up when they entered the bridge, expecting for something dreadful to happen at the last moment. But the silence was not broken by anything except for the sound of rushing water, their steps, and laborious breathing.

The cohort walked on the bridge, leaving the dark maze behind. Soon, they could feel the mist surrounding them grow thinner.

And at some point, it was gone.

They crossed the river without any trouble and returned to solid ground again.

Making several more steps, Sunny stopped and finally allowed himself to tremble. Then, he opened his mouth and said in a hoarse voice:

"Are we through?"

Although Cassie had not said anything about the need to remain quiet, each of them subconsciously avoided speaking ever since entering the mist. Because of that, the sound of his own voice startled Sunny a little.

A few moments later, Cassie answered in a hesitant tone:

"I... I think so?"

Without wasting any more time, Sunny untied the cloth that covered his eyes and removed the wax from them. Then, he carefully opened them and looked around.

They were standing on a stone shore inside a vast cave, through which the underground river was flowing unobstructed. Some distance away from them, the wall of the cave came down, with a mouth of a wide tunnel visible in it.

By his side, other members of the cohort were removing the strips of cloth. Sunny could hear the sighs of relief coming from them.

However, his attention was instantly drawn to Nephis, who had already opened her calm grey eyes and was looking at something behind him.

Turning around, Sunny followed her gaze... and froze.

Just a few meters away from them, on the shore of the dark river, he saw a human skeleton. It was sitting on the cold stones, its back straight, facing the water.

Unlike the ferocious undead from the catacombs of the Dark City, this one was tranquil and untouched by the corruption of the Forgotten Shore.

...This was the place where the First Lord of the Bright Castle had died.

The young man whom the members of the cohort only knew by his title had died on the shores of the cold underground river, just a few meters away from the bridge that he had used to escape the terrible place which, according to Cassie, no living being should have been able to escape.

Somehow, he had survived even without knowing that anyone entering the mist had to keep their eyes closed at all times. But in the end, the wounds he had received there — or somewhere up ahead, perhaps — turned out to be too grievous.

Before the last vestiges of life abandoned him, the young man — the First Lord who had wrestled the Bright Castle from the Nightmare Creatures, created a safe place for the humans sent to the Forgotten Shore to live, and lead an expedition to find a way out of this cursed place — sat down and looked in the direction of the misty, dark maze.

...The place where his friends and companions had died, leaving him alone in the darkness of this forsaken underworld.

Looking at the skeleton that sat quietly on the shore of the river, Sunny couldn't help but feel a deep feeling of awe... and sorrow.

He had never met this young man, but somehow, it felt as though they knew each other very well.

Everything that humans had on the Forgotten Shore was thanks to his bravery, power, and skill.

...What a shame that he had died here, in this lonesome place, with no one to share his last moments and tell the tale of his last deeds.

The skeleton was strangely well-preserved. It was sitting with its legs crossed, back straight, its hands resting on the hips, as if meditating. The skull of the First Lord gazed at the river with the dark chams of its empty eyes, strangely calm and at peace.

What Sunny noticed, though, was not the whiteness of the bone nor the eternal grin of the bare skull, but a thin strip of light metal resting on it like a humble crown.

There was a single bright gemstone on the metal band, placed right above the middle of the skull's forehead.

After the six of them gathered around the remains of the First Lord and stood there for a while in silence to express their respect for this extraordinary human, Nephis sighed and approached the skeleton.

Gently, she took the strip of metal and removed it from the First Lord's head.

...A moment later, the band suddenly broke into countless sparks of light, which then disappeared, absorbed into her soul core.

Sunny's eyes widened.

The crown of the First Lord... was a Memory.

Chapter 255: Dawn Shard | Shadow Slave

As the last spark of light disappeared, Nephis tilted her head to the side and remained silent for a few moments. Then, she lowered her gaze and said, addressing the First Lord:

"Thank you."

She hesitated, as though wishing to say more, but eventually just took a step back.

Kai, however, wasn't that reserved. Bowing deeply, he remained with his head down for a while, then straightened his back, looked at the skeleton, and voiced something that a few of them must have been thinking:

"Thank you. We will... we will finish what you started."

His words echoed above the cold water, eventually disappearing into the darkness. A heavy silence settled above the shore of the underground river.

A few seconds later, the charming archer turned to the rest of them and asked with uncertainty:

"I think... should we bury him?"

The members of the cohort looked at each other. Before anyone could voice their opinion, though, Sunny suddenly spoke:

"No. Just leave him as he is. He wanted to be closer to his friends when he died, so... just don't touch him."

With that, he turned his head and looked away.

Since the First Lord died outside of the terrible maze, his shadow was gone, too. Now it was just dumb and empty, like most shadows cast by inanimate objects. He had not shared in the harrowing fate of his companions, which meant that Sunny couldn't help him reunite with them... even slightly.

Neither could they bring the remains of the First Lord back outside, to bury him near the girl who had died in the quarry.

It was better to just leave him be.

'Forget about it. Think of something else.'

Sunny had other matters to consider, anyway.

That strange Memory that Nephis had absorbed... he had never even heard of a Memory that could exist outside of someone's soul. Had the First Lord somehow relinquished the ownership of it, or was this a quality that all Shard Memories possessed?

And it was, without a doubt, another Shard Memory — just like Effie's spear and his own stalwart blade. That Memory was the reason why Changing Star had ventured on this expedition, to begin with. The thing that was supposed to somehow give her a chance of defeating Gunlaug.

Sunny stared at Nephis, then said:

"That headband... what is it called? No, actually, let me guess. Dawn Shard? Dusk Shard?"

Neph looked at him and didn't answer. Her ivory face was calm and inexorable.

Sunny grinned.

"...Full of secrets, are we?"

A hint of some deep, sharp emotion appeared in her cold grey eyes. A few moments later, she said:

"Weren't you the one who made it clear that you don't want to be a true member of this cohort? You chose to be a hired blade yourself... did you not? Why should I share my secrets with you?"

Sunny remained silent for a bit, then sighed.

"Well... fair enough. I did, and you have no good reason to share anything with me."

Suddenly, Nephis smiled.

"You can change your mind, you know. If you do, I'll naturally tell you everything."

He stared at her for a while, then shook his head.

"No, no need. Answer me one question, though. How exactly is that thing supposed to help us defeat Gunlaug?"

Changing Star lingered for a bit, then simply shrugged.

"See for yourself."

A moment later, the headband left behind by the First Lord weaved itself from sparks of light on her forehead. The bright gemstone in its center softly gleamed.

And then, something about the world around Sunny changed.

'W—what...'

He blinked a couple of times, then slowly lowered his gaze and looked at the fabric of the Puppeteer's Shroud.

Or, rather, on the spellweave beneath it.

What he saw left Sunny breathless.

The five glowing embers that served as nexuses for the complicated pattern of ethereal strings permeating the Memory suddenly shone brighter.

Much, much brighter.

In fact, their radiance was now almost as intense as of those inside the black onyx armor he had purchased at the Memory Market. Which was... which

was...

An Ascended Memory.

'What the hell?'

Pulling on the thread tied around his neck, Sunny fished out the Blood Blossom from under his armor and stared at it, perplexed. The two embers inside the intricate pendant had become much brighter, too.

Not knowing that Sunny had the ability to peer into the inner weave of Memories, Nephis explained:

"The Dawn Shard possesses a single, but also singularly powerful enchantment. It empowers all Memories around it. The area of effect of the enchantment is very large... but the enhancement it provides is ever larger."

'...You don't say!'

Staring at his Memories, Sunny felt as though he was on the verge of being dumbstruck. Singular was the right word to describe the effect of the Dawn Shard. He had never heard of a Memory being capable of rising the power of another one by almost an entire rank...

'Wait, did she say... all Memories?'

All Memories... all of them... in a very large radius?

'Impossible!'

With that crown on her head, Nephis would not only be able to stand a chance in a fight against Gunlaug, but also make each one of her followers so much more dangerous. She would become a perfect general for a small army of Awakened.

... But wasn't there something wrong with that statement?

Sunny frowned.

'All Memories... hold on. All?'

Glancing at Changing Star, he asked:

"So that thing makes every Memory around you vastly more powerful?"

Nephis gave him a silent nod.

Sunny's frown deepened.

"Then do you not see a problem here? Won't it enhance that damn golden armor of Gunlaug's, too? How exactly does it give you a chance against him, then?"

She lingered for a few moments, then smiled slightly.

"It would not, would it? But, hey... do you want me to tell you another secret?"

Sunny glared at her without saying anything. He knew better than to get himself into such a clumsy trap.

Only, as it turned out, there was no trap. Nephis just waited for a bit and continued:

"It will help me because the golden armor Gunlug wears is not a Memory."

Before he could say anything, she added:

"In fact, it is an Echo."

Chapter 256: True Reason | Shadow Slave

Sunny was silent for a while.

An Echo... that weird golden armor was actually a copy of some strange Corrupted Nightmare Creature?

What kind of creature took the shape of an armor?

But then again, the fact that it looked like an armor didn't mean that it was all it could look like. The main trait of the golden armor was that it seemed to be made out of liquid metal. That metal always flowed and moved around, enveloping Gunlaug's body like a second layer of skin.

The only thing that never changed was the mirror-like surface that served him as a face.

It wasn't impossible to imagine that the mass of living metal was, in fact, not a Memory but a bizarre Echo.

Not impossible, but a bit of a stretch.

Glancing at Nephis, Sunny asked:

"How do you even know this?"

She hesitated for a few moments, then said:

"You already know that we have an ally inside the castle. She was the one who told us."

That mysterious spy again... Sunny became even more convinced that this person was of a very high rank among the Bright Lord's servants. Only someone extremely close to him would know such an important secret.

In fact, Sunny expected that the paranoid tyrant would never let anyone learn of it.

Why would one of Gunlaug's most loyal minions help his enemy? Was it all an elaborate trap orchestrated by the Bright Lord himself?

Looking at Changing Star with a deep scowl on his face, he asked:

"Can this ally of yours even be trusted?"

If he was right in his guess about the identity of the spy... well, things would become complicated.

She was silent for a while, then said evenly:

"Trusted? Not really... never, actually. However, we can trust in the information that was provided to us."

He raised his eyebrows.

"And why is that?"

Nephis shrugged and then answered, her voice indifferent:

"Because I am the only chance anyone here has of ever getting out of this cursed place. And Gunlaug is not."

'Interesting...'

So, one of the top ranks of the Bright Lord's forces was an opportunist who desired to return to the real world desperately enough to risk betraying the ruthless tyrant. That person had been loyal to Gunlaug because there was no better alternative, but then changed sides once the last daughter of the Immortal Flame clan appeared like a miracle and promised to save the people of the Forgotten Shore.

That ally of hers was either swayed by Neph's rhetoric like the rest of the unfortunate fools in the Dark City or was confident of ending up among the few lucky people who would actually have the chance of surviving what was about to come.

...Or just knew something that Sunny did not.

In any case, Changing Star seemed to be confident in the information the spy provided, so he did not see the point of doubting it. She wasn't any more naive or trusting than he was, after all.

Nephis had learned the art of cynicism from the best.

Kai, who had been listening to their conversation with a fair bit of curiosity, suddenly cleared his throat.

"Uh... I am very sorry to interrupt you guys. But I just wanted to ask — since we have found the remains of the First Lord and came into possession of this Memory you were discussing... does that mean that the expedition is over? Have we actually accomplished our goal? Really?"

That, indeed, would seem to be the case.

However, Sunny knew better.

With a friendly smile, he shook his head.

"No. No, buddy, the goal of this expedition has not been achieved yet."

The charming archer looked at him with surprise:

"But... didn't we get the thing that will help us defeat Gunalugh?"

Nephis was staring at Sunny too, a subtle smile on her lips.

"Yeah, Sunny. What else do we have to do? Do tell."

He grinned.

"Well, it's very simple, really. Yes, you told us that the reason for this adventure of ours was to find the means of overthrowing the Bright Lord, and it certainly was a reason. But it's not the whole reason, is it?"

Cassie turned her head slightly to listen to him and sighed.

Caster's face, meanwhile, had turned grim. Effie didn't seem to care one way or another.

Nephis, on the other hand, just smiled wider.

"What is the whole reason then?"

Sunny gestured at the mouth of the tunnel in front of them.

"To finish what the First Lord had started, of course."

Kai was looking between him and Changing Star, unsure of what was going on.

"Uh... what do you mean? Exactly?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Think about it, Kai. We saw the same map. What were the symbols drawn at the very edge of it, near the place where the First Lord's expedition had disappeared?"

The charming archer frowned.

"That... uh. There were... three of them? A crown, a question mark. And a red cross?"

Sunny smiled.

"Exactly. There were six crosses drawn on the map, each marking one of the headless statues. Two to the east of the Dark City, one to the north, one to the west, and two to the south. We had visited one of the two statues situated to the south already. That's where the Spider Matriarch had weaved her nest."

He turned to Nephis and said, his smile gone:

"So the truth of it all is that the First Lord never really intended to find a way through the Hollow Mountains, isn't it? He wasn't a fool who would do

something so misguided. No, he came to this godforsaken place for the same reason that we are here. To find the last statue."

Changing Star was silent for a bit.

When the silence was on the verge of growing uncomfortable, she suddenly said:

"That is correct."

Kai stared at her in astonishment.

"But... why? No, wait... what's so important about that statue?"

Nephis sighed.

"This is something that people can only volunteer to do. Anyone who doesn't wish to proceed can stay behind and avoid risking their lives in the battle. In fact, some of us probably should."

She turned to face the tunnel, remained silent for a bit, and then said:

"Yes, somewhere up ahead lies another ancient statue. There will be a powerful creature guarding it. I don't know what that guardian is, exactly, but we have to kill it. Anyone who is willing to fight can join me. Others can stay back and wait for my return."

She glanced at the members of the cohort and added:

"However, if you do join me, you'll have to follow one simple rule. No matter what happens, it's imperative that you don't deliver the final blow to the creature... unless you have reached and touched the statue first."

Chapter 257: Nightmare Champion | Shadow Slave

'Ah. So that is how it works.'

Initially, Sunny had suspected that the mysterious Shard Memories were just rewarded to those who managed to slay certain powerful Nightmare Creatures who dwelled close to the headless statues.

The truth, however, turned out to be more complicated. The creature itself, most likely, did not even matter — it was the act of vanquishing a powerful foe after coming in contact with a statue that summoned the Memory from oblivion.

That was why they had received the Midnight Shard before even learning about how important these ancient monuments were. Sunny, Nephis and Cassie had taken shelter atop the statue of the ancient knight and killed the Carapace Demon long after.

But no, that didn't make a lot of sense. If this was true, Sunny would have received another Shard Memory after defeating the Corpse Eater. So... not any powerful abomination would do.

Each statue seemed to have a... a Nightmare Champion tied to it by some invisible bond. The Carapace Demon, whom the creatures described as cursed soldiers of the fallen legion used to obey, was connected to the statue of the Knight.

The Iron Matriarch was tied to the statue of the Hunter.

Which statue had the Dawn Shard come from? The Builder, whose monument had somehow come to life and was now wandering the Forgotten Shore? Rumors said that the First Lord chased it around the Labyrinth for a long time, after all.

But somehow, Sunny felt that the metal headband had nothing to do with the walking colossus.

'So many questions.'

How many champions were still around, anyway? Nephis had not even tried to search for one tied to the Builder, nor for one tied to the Priestess. How many Shard Memories were already in the hands of humans?

Among the members of the cohort, there were now three. And they were about to challenge some abominable horror for a chance of receiving the fourth one.

'...Why do I even assume that there are only three?'

Sunny tilted his head.

Indeed, the fact that he had only seen the Midnight Shard, the Zenith Shard, and the Dawn Shard did not mean that Changing Star had not gotten other ones already. Not counting the Memory they were currently hunting, three more were unaccounted for.

How many had she found already?

He smiled darkly.

'Well... it's going to be revealed sooner or later. Right now, however, there is a more pressing issue...'

Glancing at Nephis, he asked:

"What happens if I get the Memory? As you reminded so astutely, I am not one of your lackeys. That would throw a wrench in your plans, wouldn't it?"

Sunny couldn't imagine Changing Star leaving something that important to chance.

However, to his surprise, she just shrugged:

"Keep it, if you want."

He frowned.

Why was Nephis so nonchalant about the possibility of a Shard Memory falling into his hands? Wait... why was she so indifferent about him already possessing the Midnight Shard?

One possible explanation was that it didn't matter who held the Shard Memory — as long as it was in human hands. The other explanation... made Sunny very uncomfortable.

Maybe she was just sure that fate would push the two in the same direction. If this was true, then it didn't really matter which one of them possessed the Shards.

He lingered for a bit, then shake his head and said:

"...Well, what are we waiting for? You didn't really expect any of us to stay behind while others fight, right? Let's go and hunt this monster."

Honestly, while Sunny couldn't even imagine what type of terrible creature guarded the hidden statue, he was almost excited to find out.

He wanted to see what the six of them were capable of under the miraculous effect of the Dawn Shard...

Himself in particular.

Eventually, they arrived at a vast cavern situated somewhere in the depths of the draconian mountains. The cavern was large enough to fit the entire Bright Castle — and the hill it stood upon — inside of it. Witnessing its size, Sunny got an inkling that there was a reason why these mountains were called Hollow.

As his sight pierced the darkness ruling over the vast cavern, Sunny couldn't help but feel a deep sense of awe.

The floor of it was covered by black sand, while its walls glistened like obsidian. In the center of the cavern stood a giant pillar of dark stone. It was surrounded by massive scaffolds, which nevertheless looked tiny and insignificant on its surface.

The silhouette of an unfinished statue was easily discernable, cut from the giant pillar by the unknown sculptor. Its upper torso was almost finished, while the lower half was still encased inside the stone.

It was as though a dark giant was struggling to free himself from the pillar of stone that imprisoned him.

With a feeling of surprise, Sunny realized that he recognized the details of the unfinished giant's armor and shield. They were eerily similar to the armaments that the Black Knight guarding the ruined cathedral wore.

...And to the ones the Stone Saint wielded, too.

Looking up, he made sure that the head of the giant statue was missing.

'...Of course it is.'

All of that only took a fraction of a second.

Then, Sunny hastily looked down, trying to notice the guardian of this obsidian cave before the creature noticed them.

...But it was too late.

As soon as the members of the cohort entered the cavern, something moved in the darkness at the base of the statue, and then stepped forward.

Sunny shivered.

'Damnation!'

Standing on the black sand, a monstrous creature that resembled a cross between a lion and a raven stretched its numerous limbs. Its body was pale

as a corpse, while its head and chest were covered with dark feathers. It was massive in size, with muscles rolling like steel cables under the skin.

The creature had two powerful hind legs and six more protruding messily from its wide chest, each ending with a set of deadly claws. But the most terrifying feature it possessed was a long, jagged black beak.

It was a Spire...

"Messenger!"

That was all Sunny had time to yell before the vile abomination lunged forward, exploding into a whirlwind of hunger, madness, and death.

Chapter 258: Herald of the Crimson Terror

Sunny had already faced off against a Spire Messenger once.

Back then, the vile creature had killed several experienced hunters in a span of just a few seconds, and the rest had only been spared this fate because of Effie's strength...

That and the fact that the Messenger had no need to fight them and chose to retreat and search for easier prey.

There was nowhere to retreat in this hidden cavern. Sunny didn't even know how the flying abomination had gotten here in the first place.

However, he was not the same inexperienced kid he had been all those months ago, either.

Sunny had grown considerably stronger. His arsenal of Memories was better now. His skill and technique were far beyond what he had known in the past, and his kill count had crossed a hundred Nightmare Creatures a long time ago.

There was the Stone Saint, too.

But, most importantly, his Memories were empowered by the Crown of Dawn.

Theoretically, Sunny could stack three augmentations on the Midnight Shard — one from his shadow, one from the miraculous crown, and one from the Blood Blossom, as long as someone managed to make the Messenger bleed.

Hopefully, that would be enough to breach the gap between a dormant human and a Fallen Beast and allow him to actually wound the abomination, unlike the previous two times he had tried to cut into the flesh of similar horrors — Corpse Eater and the giant eel that had tried to hitch a ride on the ancient colossus.

...But first, he had to survive.

Judging that the Puppeteer's Shroud had a decent chance of withstanding a blow from the Messenger thanks to the enhancement of the Dawn Shard, but also not even remotely willing to put that to the test, Sunny dove to the side.

A moment later, the massive abomination collided against two shields — one belonging to Effie, the other to the Stone Saint. The terrible beak came down, aiming at the huntress...

If it was before, the round shield that protected Effie from knee to shoulder would have been easily pierced and torn apart, as if it was made out of paper instead of metal. But due to the empowering aura that emanated from the Dawn Shard, it somehow held.

The force of the impact, however, still threw both of them back. Even Shadow Saint, whose flesh was made of stone and weighed accordingly, was launched into the air like a doll made of feathers and rags.

But they had bought the cohort the precious second to regroup and counterattack.

As Kai and Cassie flew in different directions, creating some distance between them and the ferocious abomination, Nephis and Caster attacked from the sides. One sword shined with brilliant white radiance, while the other gleamed with ghostly green light.

However, the Messenger was still terrifyingly formidable. The Memories wielded by the cohort might have been enhanced, but their masters remained the same. They couldn't compete with a Fallen creature in terms of raw power and speed.

Two of the beast's six front limbs swiped forward, deflecting the swords. Two more shot at the attacking humans, forcing them to retreat while barely staying alive.

...Then, the Messenger twisted its neck and caught Kai in its sight.

Its powerful black wings lashed down, creating a small hurricane that threw Nephis and Caster aside. Using powerful hind legs to throw itself into the air, the abomination lunged at the retreating archer, who twisted his body in a desperate attempt to aim his bow.

...And then, suddenly, a triangular blade cut an arc around one of the legs and tied an invisible string around it.

'Crap!'

That was all Sunny had time to think before his hand was jerked forward with incredible force.

However, this was exactly what he wanted.

With the Dark Wing turning into a blur behind his back, Sunny used the momentum of the pull to turn his laughably slow levitation into real flight.

In fact, he shot in the direction of the Messenger as though someone had launched him from a cannon.

The Midnight Shard flashed through the air and bit into the abomination's flesh.

'Do it!'

Indeed, with both the shadow and the Dawn Shard augmenting it, the stalwart blade was able to cut into the flesh of the Fallen Beast. Granted, it felt as though he was trying to cut stone.

But it was enough.

Sunny aimed at the base of the Messenger's wing. With all the speed given to him by the combination of using the Dark Wing to levitate and the Prowling Thorn to create momentum, the blow Sunny had delivered was truly devastating. In fact, it was so forceful that every bone in his hand almost shattered.

But he wasn't the one on the sharp end of the sword.

The Midnight Shard cut deep into the wing of the vile abomination, sending rivers of blood streaming down its pale body. As soon as they did, the enchantment of the Blood Blossom awakened, making the blade even sharper. The elegant tachi tore through the wing, crippling it.

The Messenger suddenly lost control of its flight and crashed back to the ground.

'Eat dust, bastard!'

After a moment of glee, however, Sunny hurriedly dismissed the Dark Wing and plummeted down, landing on the sand some distance away from the monstrous beast.

While gliding all the way back to the floor of the cavern would have been more comfortable, he wasn't going to become a sitting duck. Crippled wing or not, the Messenger could still jump and use the other one.

Maybe...

At the same time as Sunny hit the ground and rolled, a menacing black arrow suddenly fell from above, piercing the second wing of the fearsome creature. There was no blood coming from the wound, though — the arrow greedily drank it, preventing the Blood Blossom augmentation from growing a bit stronger.

The abomination did not stagger and slowly turn into a mummy like the iron spiders had, however. It simply shook its body, causing the arrow to shatter and crumble into a stream of white sparks.

But Sunny didn't see any of that.

With his back to the Messenger, he was already running toward to giant statue with all the speed he had.

Chapter 259: Bloody Mayhem | Shadow Slave

Sunny ran to the statue with every bit of speed he could manage. Which was quite a considerable amount, by human standards... no, even by those of other Sleepers.

As the wind whistles in his ears, the shadow flew off the blade of the Midnight Shard and turned around, observing the wounded abomination. Despite the fact that its wings were mangled, the Messenger did not seem perturbed. On the contrary, it opened its terrible beak and let out a blood-curdling shriek, then lunged at the tiny humans with even more bestial fury.

'...I think it's not happy!'

Despite the mortal peril his companions found themselves in, Sunny did not stop to help them. Nephis had said that the creature guarding the cave had to be killed by a person who had touched the ancient statue — until someone did, this battle was nothing but a futile and stupidly dangerous game.

The essence of combat was murder, after all. If no one truly aimed to kill the damn thing, how could they ever hope to survive?

So Sunny was helping them after all, in a way.

Behind him, things weren't going well for the cohort. The Messenger was too big, too strong, too swift for a group of Sleepers, no matter how talented. It was already a miracle that none of them had been torn to pieces already.

But how long would that last?

As the shadow watched, the terrifying beak came down again... and once again, bounced off Effie's stalwart shield.

However, this time, a wide crack appeared on the surface of the round shield.

Before the huntress could even react, several powerful limbs shot at the cracked shield, each striking it with the force of a cannonball. Finally, the Memory gave in and shattered — along with Effie's arm. Sunny saw fragments of bone piercing her olive skin as it twisted at an unnatural angle.

'Damn! Faster!'

As the pillar of dark stone approached, he watched the Messenger try to finish the wounded huntress off and be thwarted by the Stone Saint. Simultaneously, Nephis managed to penetrate the barrier created by the creature's front limbs. Her sword flashed and bit into the pale flesh, leaving a deep gash on the abomination's side.

Judging that he was far enough to not be afraid of a sudden attack aimed at his back, Sunny commanded the shadow to turn around and return to his side. His view of the battle immediately disappeared, and soon, the shadow caught up and wrapped itself around his body.

Sunny's speed doubled.

Pursued by the sounds of a ferocious battle, he neared the unfinished statue.

However, before he could touch it, a human figure suddenly appeared in front of him in a blur and slid on the black sand, stopping right in front of the stone pillar. It was Caster.

The proud Legacy didn't look all too well. His shiny scale armor was torn by the claws of the terrible beast, leaving four deep wounds on his muscular chest. Blood was streaming from them, leaving the handsome young man pale and disheveled.

No, it wasn't just that. Caster seemed a bit off, somehow... Sunny just couldn't tell what was wrong with him exactly. He did notice, however, a crystal amulet in the form of an hourglass hanging on a silver chain around his neck.

'What is that? A charm Memory? I didn't know that Caster had a charm...'

Not wasting any time, the Legacy put his bloodied hand on the statue and closed his eyes for a moment.

'...He wasn't wearing one back on the marble arch. Right?'

Opening his eyes a second later, Caster glanced at Sunny with a dark expression and turned into a blur once again, rushing back to rejoin the battle.

Just as soon as he disappeared, Sunny crashed into the stone pillar, unceremoniously using it to stop his momentum. Bouncing off the hard surface, he rolled on the ground and shakily rose to his feet.

'Agh! Dammit! That hurt!'

That counted as touching the statue... right?

Had to.

Glancing back, Sunny saw another Blood Arrow piercing the flesh of the Spire Messenger and shattering a moment later. It wasn't destroyed, at least, just returned to Kai.

Quiet Dancer was zipping around the massive abomination, aiming at its eyes. The elegant rapier was an Echo, and as such did not enjoy the gift of the Dawn Shard, so it was more of a nuisance than a real threat to the beast. Still, it managed to deliver a couple of shallow cuts, causing the bastard to bleed.

That was exactly what Sunny needed — blood, as much blood as possible.

Launching himself forward, he held the Midnight Shard behind him and dashed toward the Messenger.

'Let's see which one of us is can kill it first, Caster. Wouldn't it be funny if an outskirt rat like me got a third Ascended Memory, while a lofty Legacy like you still had none?'

Some distance away from his prey, Sunny commanded the Stone Saint to switch her battle style.

The one the menacing Shadow liked to use the most — or simply saw as most suited to her equipment and the situation — was deliberate, elegant, and steady. But that wasn't what Sunny needed right now.

What he needed was carnage, savagery, and bloody mayhem.

Lingering for a fraction of a second, the Stone Saint suddenly threw her shield away, grasped her sword with both hands, and lunged forward. Any sort of grace she had possessed earlier was now gone. Instead of a noble knight, the Shadow now appeared as a barbarous butcher.

It seemed as though she cared neither about self-preservation nor about protecting the members of the cohort anymore. She didn't even care about killing the enemy that much. All she aimed to do was inflict the maximum amount of pain, the maximum amount of damage, and, most importantly, the maximum amount of bleeding.

Just like Sunny had commanded her to do.

As he ran back, more and more small, but heavily bleeding wounds appeared on the Messenger's massive frame. It's pale body was now half-covered in dark blood. Caster's enchanted sword added one or two, but most came from the berserk Shadow and Changing Star.

Effie was still in the fight, as well. Despite the fact that her arm was severely broken and there was bloody foam on her lips, the beautiful spear broke through the abomination's defenses and left a bloody mark on its skin, too.

But none of these attacks were powerful enough to end the creature once and for all.

Already nearing the scene of the massacre, Sunny willed his shadow to flow onto the Midnight Shard. The power of the Dawn Shard was burning inside of it, making the stalwart blade sing.

And on top of it all, the vile Blood Blossom was filling it with insatiable bloodlust and hunger.

Without slowing down, Sunny lunged at the Spire Messenger... and fell on his back. As momentum pushed him forward, he slid on the black sand and thrust the Midnight Shard upward.

Piercing the abdomen of the terrible creature, the razor-sharp sword easily cut through skin and muscle, gutting the abomination and causing it to stagger and fall.

Chapter 260: How to be a Hero

Indeed, with so much blood streaming down the Messenger's pale body, the savage augmentation of the Blood Blossom had grown vastly more powerful.

If before Sunny had felt as though he was cutting stone, now the Midnight Shard sliced through the tough flesh of the abomination with just a moderate amount of trouble. Of course, the fact that it was aimed at the soft belly of the monster instead of the adamantine black feather also played its part.

The tachi cut through the pale skin and muscle tissue, tearing its abdomen open.

As blood, guts and viscera fell from the terrible wound, Sunny slid from under the massive creature — just in time to avoid being crushed under its weight.

Even then, however, the Messenger was not yet dead.

'...What?! Curses!'

Lying on his back in an awkward position, Sunny was momentarily left defenseless. He had hoped that his strike would if not kill the monstrous abomination outright, then at least leave it stunned for a few seconds, giving him time to disengage and get away to a safe distance.

But the creature seemed to be impervious to pain and the fear of death that all living beings felt. Despite receiving a mortal wound, it only became more ferocious.

Staggered by the unexpected attack, the Messenger lost balance and fell to the ground. Its head hit the black sand, sending a cloud of it into the air.

...Then, its round corvine eye locked onto Sunny and flushed with eerie madness.

Knowing that he was not going to be fast enough, Sunny desperately tried to roll away. But it was too late. The terrifying jagged beak shot in his direction, threatening to impale him through the chest.

'Damn it a...'

However, at the last moment, a human figure in an elegant black and white armor suddenly appeared between him and the abhorrent beast. The incandescent sword lashed out, pushing the beak slightly to the side.

As the result, the Messenger failed to kill Sunny. Instead, the beak pierced the Starlight Legion Armor and tore through Changing Star's shoulder, almost severing her left arm. Nephis was thrown aside in a rain of blood, while the abomination opened its mouth and let out another deafening shriek.

For a moment, time slowed.

Sunny, who had just rose to one knee, noticed a sword surrounded by ghostly green lights approaching the Messenger's neck. Caster was seconds away from finishing the cursed creature off...

But before he got the chance, a heavy triangular dagger flashed in the air and sunk into the creature's eye, penetrating through it deep enough to reach the brain.

The Messenger froze. Its ugly raven-like head swayed slightly. The beak fell open, revealing rows of sharp teeth and a long, wet, crimson tongue.

Looking at the monster with a dark expression, Sunny pulled on the string of the Prowling Thorn, wreaking havoc inside its skull. The kunai tore through the round black eye on the way back, flying into the air in a stream of blood, bone, and chunks of brain matter.

Finally, the creature convulsed and crashed onto the ground.

Its eyes dimmed, then glossed over.

The corner of Sunny's mouth curled upward.

[You have slain a Fallen Monster, Cursed Herald.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

'Come on!'

[...You have received a Memory.]

A triumphant gleam appeared in his dark eyes.

The cohort was in a pathetic state.

Effie had the bones in her arm shattered into tiny pieces, with sharp splinters tearing through her skin. Her ribs and lungs were wounded, too. Caster was bleeding heavily from the four gashes left on his torso by the Messenger's claws. Kai lost too much blood to the Blood Arrow and was now on the verge of fainting.

Neph's left arm was partially severed and barely attached to her body. The sight of it was ghastly.

Even the Stone Saint was severely damaged.

Only Sunny and Cassie were more or less in one piece.

It was all worth it, though. The Spire Messenger was actually dead, while they were not.

Lying on the black sand, Effie suddenly laughed. Sunny gave her a strange look.

"Have you lost your mind? What are you laughing at?"

The huntress shrugged, then grimaced from pain.

"Oh, it's just... I was thinking whether we are legendary heroes now or just, you know... fools of legendary proportions. All of us in the outer settlement

— the Castle too, I guess — heard the stories about the incredible exploits of the first cohort hundreds of times. Killing a Spire Messenger who made its nest in the throne room, and all that. But I never once thought that I would actually do something that impossible as well."

She grew silent, and then added:

"It's weird."

Sunny sort of understood her feelings. However, he wasn't going to admit it. He didn't want his name to ever appear in the same sentence as the word "hero". After everything he had experienced, Sunny had become allergic to it.

He sighed.

"You do know how one becomes a mythical hero, right? It's really easy, you just have to do something outlandish and then die. The death part is the key, actually. So I would rather not be a hero, ever."

With that, he stood up and tiredly dismissed his battle Memories and the Stone Saint. Since only Cassie and he were unscathed, it fell to them to help everyone treat their wounds.

Well, in this case, they just had to make sure that no one died before Neph summoned her flames and healed everyone. Sunny wasn't sure that she'll be able to remain conscious after that, though.

Walking over to their leader, he sat down, looked at her, and then asked:

"...Are you stupid? Why did you do that?"

She glanced at him with her usual indifferent expression, straightened her back, and said:

"What do you mean?"

Sunny sighed.

"Why did you get between me and the Messenger? Look at the state you're in."

She looked at him, then shrugged with one shoulder.

"I can heal myself, remember? You can't."

He shook his head.

"I also remember that my armor is two whole tiers above yours. Chances are, I wouldn't be even wounded that terribly."

Nephis was silent for a bit. Then, she simply said:

"...Too risky."

Sunny couldn't help but laugh.

"Gods! I just don't get you. I really don't. You are so morbidly cunning sometimes, but other times, you are so stupidly naive. It doesn't make any sense."

Changing Star did not respond for a long time and just stared at him. When she responded, her tone was as flat as usual:

"Right back at you."

Chapter 261: Moon Shard | Shadow Slave

Some time later, Sunny found the time to dove into the Soul Sea and take a look at the new Memory he had gotten.

It was a heavy round shield forged from dull, lusterless, dark steel. Inside of it, visible only to him, a complex weave of ethereal strings shone with stark radiance.

Memory: [Dusk Shard].

Memory Rank: Ascended.

Memory Tier: II.

Memory Type: Weapon.

Memory Description: [Forged from a shard of a fallen star, this shield contains the weight of the heavens. Depending on the heart of its wielder, it can be light as a feather or heavy as regret.]

Memory Enchantments: [Indomitable].

Enchantment Description: [Following the will of its master, the Dusk Shard can change its weight.]

Sunny frowned.

This enchantment... at first glance, it seemed very unassuming. People usually thought about the weight of their weapons only when they considered how much endurance they would need to wield them. In that regard, the lighter the weapon was, the better — a light weapon could allow a person to fight longer without growing tired, which often meant the difference between victory and defeat.

However, things changed when it came to the Awakened, who often possessed inhuman strength and endurance. Light weapons had their role to

play, but more often than not, what you really needed was force. And the more mass something had, the more force it could produce.

In the past, Sunny had only considered shields as a defensive tool. But after watching Effie and Stone Saint use them in battle, he realized that in the hands of a trained warrior, a shield could be as destructive and deadly as a sword. Sometimes much more so.

Just imagining Effie bashing someone with a shield that weighed a few hundred kilograms sent shivers running down his spine. Not to mention that the weight could be changed on the fly, making it light to maneuver faster, then turning it into an improvised siege ram at the right moment.

But even in terms of pure defense, a shield that could be turned into a literal wall was priceless. He could see a monster such as the Spire Messenger colliding with it... and simply bouncing off in the chorus of shattering bones.

...Maybe.

Granted, Sunny never trained with a shield, and the sword he used demanded two hands to be wielded properly. But where there was a will, there would be a way.

With a slight smile, Sunny summoned the Dusk Shard. The sparks of light appeared in a whirlwind around his arm. A few long seconds later, the silhouette of a large round shield weaved itself into reality. After a few more seconds, and the Memory was fully formed.

'How ni... oh crap!'

With a surprised yelp, Sunny staggered and toppled over. Luckily, he fell on top of the dull iron shield — otherwise, he might have been crushed under its weight.

'This... is so heavy!'

The damn thing was heavier than he had ever expected. In fact, it was probably too heavy for him to even lift, let alone carry around.

The members of the cohort glanced at Sunny, who was struggling to stand up, with perplexed expressions.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny rose to one knee and awkwardly tried to lift the shield off the ground. However, no matter how hard he tried, he only managed to drag it by a few centimeters.

"Curses!". com

'Alright, I admit it. It's too damn heavy! Let's reduce the weight a little...'

But a few seconds later, his face froze.

'...This can't be. No way!'

However, the truth was hard to deny.

He... couldn't change the Dusk Shard's weight at all.

The enchantment that was supposed to allow Sunny to do that was there, but it required him to actively manipulate the soul essence — shadow essence, in his case — to access it.

The most powerful enchantments were all like that. And the higher a Memory rank, the more probable it was for the enchantments it possessed to be really powerful.

The problem was that Sleepers had no way to control and manipulate their soul essence.

Sunny didn't know whether to laugh or cry. What were the chances of him coming to possess not one, not two, but three whole Ascended Memories... only to find out that two of them were completely unusable, while the third one required him to somehow become a master marksman to avoid dying from blood loss?

'Damn it! Damn it all! But especially damn that damned Fated attribute!'

While Sunny was grinding his teeth in outrage, Effie approached him and glanced down from her considerable height. Then, she leaned forward, took the Dusk Shard by the rim, and lifted it — along with Sunny — from the ground, seemingly without too much strain.

"That's it, then? The Memory you got from the pale bastard?"

Finally standing up with the help of the huntress, he stared at her for a long time, his expression unreadable. Then, he suddenly smiled:

"Yes. By the way, Effie. We're friends, aren't we? See, I couldn't help but notice that your shield Memory was destroyed in that last fight. How about..."

She rolled her eyes.

"Wait, don't tell me... Sunny's Shady Emporium is open for business again?"

He blinked a couple of times, then grinned:

"Why yes! How did you know?"

The huntress glanced down at the heavy shield, squinted, and said in a cautious tone:

"Well... what do you want in exchange?"

Sunny thought for a bit.

"That bottomless bag of yours. And two other Awakened Memories."

Before Effie could come to a decision, though, Nephis interrupted their conversation. Coming closer, she glanced at the huntress first, then at Sunny, and finally at the shield.

Finally, she asked:

"How about giving it to Effie in exchange for another Ascended Memory? One more suited to your technique. "

Sunny dismissed the Dusk Shard and hesitated for a bit, looking at Changing Star with doubt. Was this her ploy to get the Shard Memory from him?

If she had an Ascended Memory all this time, why had she been hiding it? And where could she have gotten one, to begin with?

After a while, he said:

"I don't know. Show me the Memory, and then we'll decide."

Nephis silently stepped closer and took his hand. Then, a spark of energy traveled from her body to his.

The Spell whispered:

[You have received a Memory.]

Throwing a dubious glance at Nephis, Sunny summoned the runes and found the name of the Memory he had received. His shadow tilted its head, surprised.

Shimmering in the air in front of him, a string of runes read:

Memory: [Moon Shard].

Chapter 262: Path to Damnation

'Another Shard Memory?'

Sunny raised an eyebrow, glanced at Nephis, and turned back to the runes. His eyes glistened.

Memory: [Moon Shard].

Memory Rank: Ascended.

Memory Tier: I.

Memory Type: Weapon.

Memory Description: [When the stars were extinguished and fell, a lonely moon remained in the empty sky. With no sun to shine upon it, the moon grew dim, withered, and died. As the last remnants of moonlight were devoured by darkness, one small shard was forged into this subtle blade.]

Memory Enchantments: [Unseen].

Enchantment Description: [Forged from moonlight, this blade appears in the hand of its wielder without delay.]

Sunny's pupils widened slightly. With a tense frown, he summoned the Moon Shard.

A graceful dagger with a long and slender blade appeared in his hand. It tapered to a needle-like point and had a simple cross-guard, with a handle made from glossy black wood. The most striking feature of the dagger was that it seemed to be forged out of clear, misty glass. That glass, however, appeared to be as strong as steel... and much, much sharper.

In the darkness of the underground cavern, the ghostly stiletto was nearly invisible.

What really stunned Sunny, though, was not its look or its rank, but the fact that the moonlight blade had appeared in his hand instantaneously. There had been no sparks of light, no process of weaving itself into existence from nothingness. The dagger was simply suddenly there, as if it had always been that way.

This... this was an incredible enchantment. It might not have seemed that powerful, but Sunny instantly understood that there was a lot more to this simple trait than most people would assume.

Once summoned, Memories took time to form. The Dusk Shard had weaved itself into existence in about six to eight seconds. But even if it was just a single second, like the time it took Neph's silver sword to appear, the process was still not instantaneous. What's more, the appearance of a Memory was telegraphed in advance by the dancing sparks of light.

In short, it was very hard to take the enemy by surprise by suddenly summoning a Memory. A skilled opponent would always have enough time to notice it and react accordingly — unless they were lured into a cunning trap by a sword savant like Changing Star. But even then, it wasn't easy to plan and execute such a move.

Yet all of that didn't apply to the Moon Shard. The slender blade of the ghostly dagger could appear out of nowhere in an instant and immediately strike at the target.

'...What an insidious little thing.'

It was uniquely suited to Sunny's preferred method of engaging the enemy, indeed. He liked to strike from the shadows and kill with one strike. With the ghostly blade in his arsenal, though, he would not even have to hide in the darkness in order to deliver an unexpected and deadly blow.

No one would see it coming.

Not to mention that it was an Ascended Memory. Armed with the Moon Shard, Sunny would finally be able to wound and kill Fallen creatures — even without the miraculous enhancement of the Crown of Dawn.

His own shadow would be more than enough.

Granted, he would have to get really close and personal to a monster in order to use the dagger. But still, at least with it, he stood a chance.

Suppressing a satisfied smile from appearing on his lips, Sunny turned to Nephis and asked in an incredulous tone:

"Where did you get this thing?"

She lingered for a few moments, then said:

"North of the Dark City."

Sunny nodded. That made sense. There was another red cross on her map, about a week's worth of traveling time north of the ruins. It was drawn near a symbol resembling a grotesque, misshapen skull.

Changing Star had indeed been busy in the three months that he had spent hunting monsters on the dark streets of the cursed city.

Now, five of the Shard Memories were accounted for: Dawn Shard, Zenith Shard, Dusk Shard, Midnight Shard, and Moon Shards. Only two remained.

Sunny wondered which statue they were tied to, and whether someone out there already held them in their hands.

...It didn't matter that much for now, though.

With a sigh, he dismissed the ghostly dagger and said:

"I have to warn you that the enchantment on that shield requires an Awakened to activate it. It is supposed to be able to change its weight and mass freely, but actually, it's just stuck being stupidly heavy."

Nephis glanced at Effie, who just shrugged.

"I'm fine with it as is."

Sunny finally allowed himself to smile.

"...Ah, that's great then. We have a deal."

In the end, they had to spend a couple of days in the vast underground cavern. Nephis had to recover from her ghastly wound and the strain of healing the rest of the cohort, while all of them had not liked the idea of venturing back into the mist with their Memories damaged.

Eventually, though, they were ready to head back.

Sunny used this short moment of respite to rest and practice Shadow Dance, slowly moving toward his goal of mastering its first step.

He knew that there was nothing but bloodshed ahead of them. First, they would have to fight their way through the untold horrors of the Labyrinth. And once they reached the Dark City...

The last act of this messed-up play would begin.

Looking back, he couldn't believe how far he had come in these past eight months.

When Sunny arrived on the Forgotten Shore, he was weak and inexperienced.

His first fight against a single carapace scavenger almost cost him his life.

And now, here he was, standing near the corpse of a Fallen Monster he had killed with his own two hands.

From barely killing a single carapace scavenger, to almost losing his life in a fight against a carapace centurion, to summoning a horror of the depths and finishing off the Carapace Demon.

From entering the Dark City not knowing anything about it to hunting down dozens of Nightmare Creatures on its cursed streets, to fighting against a

horde of undead monsters in the catacombs beneath it.

From venturing back into the Labyrinth of his own free will and waging war against the tribe of monstrous spiders to riding on the shoulder of an ancient giant and battling Fallen abominations and hordes of Awakened creatures.

From finding a nameless grave in the foothills of the Hollow Mountains to witnessing the last resting place of the First Lord in their depths.

He had lived through so much, endured so much, and accomplished so much.

Of course, there had not been only victories. He had tasted defeat, too... a lot of it. Both in battle and in his tentative attempts to build human relationships with other prisoners of this desolate hell.

He had experienced pain, sorrow, and despair.

...And he was going to taste even more of it soon.

Turning his head slightly, Sunny looked at his companions. Nephis, Cassie, Kai, Effie, and Caster were busy with final preparations for their long return journey.

How many of them would be alive by the end of all of this?

Closing his eyes, he sighed.

It was not going to be easy to survive the finale.

But Sunny was determined to show the rest of the world what he was really made of.

He was going to win. He was going to be the last one standing.

No matter what he had to do.

...Even if doing it would break him.

Chapter 263: The Beginning of the End

Three months later, a group of six battered humans appeared from the sea of crimson coral and approached a magnificent white arch. Moving with the precision of experienced predators, they swiftly slaughtered a few transient creatures that hid in the deep shadow cast by the ancient structure, stripped them down for meat, and swiftly climbed up.

Against all odds, the cohort had survived the journey back to the Dark City.

...If only barely.

Looking north from the top of the marble arch, Sunny saw the distant grey wall. His gaze lingered on it, full of exhaustion, triumph, and dark apprehension.

Finally, they had returned.

The past three months had been an endless bloody nightmare, with countless horrors and battles leaving their marks on him. And yet, they had also been an anvil against which he was tested, tempered, and made stronger as the result.

Sunny didn't have a mirror, but was sure that his appearance changed a lot. He could tell just by looking at other members of the cohort.

Changing Star's white armor was now covered by numerous scratches and tears that even the restorative effect of the Soul Sea couldn't heal. Her silver hair was longer, reaching to the middle of her back. The ivory face of their leader had grown thin, with dark circles visible under her striking, burning grey eyes.

Caster changed even more. The neat and dignified young scion was nowhere to be seen: instead, a man with disheveled hair and a short scruffy beard stood in his place, his face dark and grim. Sometimes, Sunny thought that he could even see a grey hair or two in his luscious mane.

Kai was still beautiful and elegant, but most of his charm was hidden under layers and layers of dirt, dust, and dried blood. The stylish armor he had worn was now long gone, destroyed in one of the vicious battles they had fought, and replaced by a rather unflattering garment that seemed to be woven out of bluish seaweed.

The archer also wielded a new bow, this one long a powerful, fashioned out of two curved horns that had belonged to a creature that Sunny would rather not think about. Suffice it to say, this Memory was of the fifth tier and truly deadly.

Effie was much the same, except for the fact that she had become even leaner, her robust musculature not covered even by a gram of fat. The huntress wielded two Shard Memories, both responsible for sending dozens upon dozens of Nightmare Creature to their deaths. Her archaic bronze armor was dented all over, but somehow still held together

Cassie was the youngest of them, so the changes that had happened to her were perhaps the most pronounced. By now, she had lost most of her childish softness and had turned into a beautiful young woman that looked to be on the cusp of adulthood. She had three Echoes tied to her core now, one given to her by Nephis, the other one by Kai.

With the help of her Echoes and the Dark Wing, Cassie was now able to move and participate in battles almost as if she was not blind.

...Almost.

And then there was Sunny himself. He was perhaps even more beaten and battered than the rest of them, the Puppeteer's Shroud almost coming apart at the seams. His hair was long, messy, and in desperate need of a good wash.

Sadly, his skin was still as pale as that of a corpse. He was also unable to grow even a bit of scruff, let alone a real beard.

But, oh well... why care about the little things?

Summoning the runes, Sunny found a particular cluster and glanced at it.

The runes shimmered in the twilight of the approaching night.

Shadow Fragments: [938/1000].

A dark smile appeared on his lips.

'Almost.'

In the past three months, Sunny had participated in countless battles. His main responsibility was that of a scout, and as such, he was not a part of the cohort's main strike force. But even then, he had faced and slain more than a hundred Nightmare Creatures.

Closer to two hundred, in fact.

Among them were beasts, monsters, as well as a few demons and even a devil or two. Sunny absorbed the remnants of their shadows and used his share of the soul shards to trade for Memories with other members of the cohort, which he then fed to the Stone Saint.

And now, he was so close to reaching full saturation of his Shadow Core.

His prowess and physique were considerably enhanced, too. Somewhere along the way, Sunny had crossed the line of humanly possible and was now firmly in the realm of inhuman ability. He was faster, stronger, and more enduring than any mundane human could ever hope to be.

His shadow had grown much more potent, too, since its enhancement increased proportionally to his own power.

...Or was it the other way around?

In any case, Sunny felt that when the shadow was wrapped around his body, he was now almost at the level of an actual Awakened. Very few Sleepers on the Forgotten Shore could challenge him in terms of raw power.

Of course, all of them had deadly Aspect Abilities of their own.

...And several of the most deadly Sleepers among them were all right here, with him, setting up camp and getting ready to cook him food.

Sunny wasn't sure, but guessed that Effie and Caster had already fully saturated their Soul Cores, beating him to it — the huntress because of the years she had spent hunting monsters on the streets of the Dark City, and the Legacy because of the soul shards his clan must have provided him before his first journey into the Dream Realm.

Nephis... Sunny wasn't sure. Logic dictated that she should have reached the point of saturation before Sunny did, but he still saw her absorbing shards after each battle. So either she did not, or her Aspect had other uses for the excess soul essence.

Or she was just putting on an expensive show.

Kai and Cassie were behind him in terms of the amount of accumulated essence, but not by much. Each of them was now a powerhouse, just like the rest of the cohort.

Looking at the people busying themselves with mundane tasks of setting up the camp, Sunny inhaled deeply and smiled.

"Ah. Aren't we a sight to behold?"

Chapter 264: First Things First

They truly were.

When leaving the Dark City behind, Sunny had known how powerful the members of the cohort were. However, he had not quite realized just how well-rounded and perfectly suited to face various challenges presented by the Labyrinth their group was.

With Nephis, Effie and Caster leading the charge, most Nightmare Creatures populating the forest of crimson coral had little chance to survive, not with the Crown of Dawn pouring raw power into the armor and weapons of the cohort, at least. Each of the three was a deadly and versatile fighter, with their own unique approach to combat and strengths that complemented each other.

With the three slayers holding off the opponents while being supported by Kai from above, very few things could stand in their way.

Night himself had turned out to be an astonishingly deadly presence on the battlefield, as well. With the Blood Arrow providing him with a conditionally endless supply of arrows, he could just stay in the air, out of reach of the abominations that had no way to attack at range — which was most of them — and pick them out with well-aimed shots.

With the addition of the formidable horn bow, the distance at which he could hit the target had increased tremendously, allowing him to eliminate some of the enemies long before they had gotten close enough to the cohort for an effective attack. His opening salvo had made a lot of battles much less problematic.

Of course, Kai couldn't fly above the Labyrinth with impunity. The grey sky was full of danger, too, and by separating himself from his companions, he risked being attacked and torn apart by the abominations that populated it. He had to maintain a fragile balance.

But the flying Nightmare Creatures were a threat to the cohort regardless of whether or not the charming archer rose into the air or not. Actually, this was the type of enemy they were equipped to fight the least. That's why Kai's ability to fly had turned out to be priceless.

Especially because he was usually able to fly faster or at least maneuver better than most of the creatures that dwelled in the sky. More than once, they had survived only because the archer was able to draw the fury of the aerial abominations and dodge their attack long enough to either fell them with a perfectly aimed arrow or give his companions a chance to join the fight.

Sunny and Cassie usually protected the rear of the cohort to prevent anything from attacking their companions from the back — which happened more often than one would hope. With the help of the Stone Saint and the Quiet Dancer, and later the other two Echoes belonging to the blind girls, they were able to hold off anything until the main force was done with their share of the opponents and joined the fray.

That was not to say that their role in the cohort was less important.

If anything, Sunny was convinced that what they did was more vital to the survival of each member of the cohort than what the fighters were doing.

It was true that, with the help of the Dawn Shard, the cohort was well equipped to handle most monsters of the Labyrinth. What they truly had to fear were the creatures that defied all logic, the perils that the human mind could not even comprehend, and the Labyrinth itself — as well as the dark waters of the cursed sea and the ancient horrors that dwelled beneath them.

That was what Sunny and Cassie had to protect the group from.. Com

As Sunny absorbed more and more shadow fragments, the range at which he could control his shadow grew exponentially. By now, the shadow could move almost as far as a whole kilometer ahead of the cohort, scouting for any potential threat and giving them plenty of time to decide if they wanted to fight or change course and avoid the danger entirely.

If anything, it had become a little feral and now preferred to wander around aimlessly and far away, returning to Sunny only when specifically commanded to do so.

But regardless of that, the value of being able to see and identify their enemies in advance was impossible to overestimate. It was just too valuable. In battle, the tiniest advantage could decide the difference between life and death, and the advantages of knowledge and the first strike were possibly the most important.

However, there were things on the Forgotten Shore that even Sunny could not see, predict, or escape from.

That was where Cassie's affinity to revelations and miraculous intuition came into play. She was responsible for preventing the cohort from stumbling into anything that would destroy their very souls before anyone could even understand what was happening, or something that simply could not be defeated.

If not for Cassie, a sudden storm or a creature akin to the Soul Devourer — or something even more terrifying — would have ended their lives long before they returned back to the Dark City.

But even with all that, every day in the Labyrinth brought them to the very verge of death. No matter how strong, well-rounded, and well-equipped the cohort was, the nightmares of the Forgotten Shore were always more powerful, unpredictable, and bizarre, making any and all preparations useless.

In the end, the only reason that none of them had died from grievous wounds, sickness, or infection was because of Changing Star's healing flames.

In the three months that they had spent traveling through the Labyrinth, Sunny fully understood why healers were so sought after among the Awakened. He knew it before, in theory, but only after being subjected to the daily terror of their journey had he realized how life-changing — literary — the presence of a healer in the cohort truly was.

And so, just like that, they had done the unthinkable and managed to travel all the way from the edges of the Forgotten Shore back to its center — thanks to their power and resolve, their foresight, their strength, and their ability to rely on and help each other.

As well as, in large part, pure dumb luck.

And now that they were about to return to the cursed haven of the Dark City, their luck was about to be tested as it had never been tested before.

...But that was for later.

First, the members of the cohort had to fulfill their obligation to Sunny.

He had joined this expedition on a certain condition, after all.

Glancing once again at the distant grey wall, Sunny clenched his fists. The corner of his mouth curled up in a vicious grin.

'...Wait a bit more, bastard. Your day of reckoning is coming.'

In two days, they were going to kill the Black Knight.

Chapter 265: Hateful Shadow | Shadow Slave

Turning away from the distant wall of the Dark City, Sunny closed his eyes, inhaled deeply, and let go of his anger.

He had to keep his head cool, for now. Killing a Fallen Devil was not going to be an easy task. It might even turn out to be his undoing.

...But he was determined to see it done. The debt of blood he owed that creature had to be repaid, no matter what.

Walking over to the fire, Sunny sat down and tried to remember the details of their previous stay on this old, weathered marble arch. What a fun couple of days that had been.

Rather pleasing on the eye, too...

His shadow shook its head dejectedly and turned away.

Soon, Nephis handed him his share of the food. Her culinary skills had improved a lot during these months — despite the fact that there had not been a large variety of ingredients at their disposal. Still, being able to turn the most repulsive of monsters into a delicious meal was something that not everyone was capable of.

'This should be a separate course at the Academy.'

Teacher Julius had taught him how to consume various things in the Dream Realm without ending up poisoned to death, but he had neglected to go in-depth on how to actually make them taste good.

Sinking his teeth into a juicy piece of meat, Sunny forgot about his troubles for a bit and simply enjoyed this rare moment of bliss. Disposing of the meat, he smiled in satisfaction and wiped his hands on the soft fabric of the Puppeteer's Shroud. Then, he glanced at Nephis and asked:

"We should be able to reach the city tomorrow, yes?"

She gave him a nod.

"...If nothing happens."

Sunny thought for a bit, then said in a curious tone:

"Do you think Gunlaug knows that we are coming back?"

Nephis thought for a few moments before replying. Her voice was calm and indifferent.

"Definitely."

Sunny sighed. This was his conclusion as well: back when he had first entered the Bright Castle, he had learned from Caster about a certain Artisan that could track the general location of anyone a person had ever met. This was how Caster knew how many Sleepers of their crop had been sent to the Forgotten Shore.

Even if Gunlaug possessed no other method to learn of their approach, all he had to do was ask that woman.

Sunny shifted a little and asked:

"Should we expect a welcoming party?"

Changing Star shook her head.

"I don't think so. There's no need for him to do anything. Gunlaug knows that we will come to him of our own free will... simply because there's nowhere else for us to go."

She fell silent for a while, and then added:

"But most of all, this has never been about killing me or my people. It was always about destroying the ideas I represent. What's the point of crushing me if no one is there to see it? Gunlaug won't do anything without an audience. He had sent Harus to stop us from escaping the stage, but now that we are back on it, there is no need for him to rush the inevitable."

Everyone listened to the conversation with dark expressions. Sunny glanced at them, hesitated for a bit, and asked:

"Are you confident that you can defeat him?"

Nephis stared at the fire. After a while, she simply said:

"Yes."

Hearing that, Sunny smiled sweetly.

"Well, good for you, but I am not. So let's finish our deal before the lot of you get killed by that maniac. Alright?"

A corner of Neph's mouth curled upward.

"You are talking about the Fallen Devil?"

He nodded.

"Yes. The bastard. You promised to help me kill him, remember?"

Meanwhile, Kai was looking at him with a complicated expression. Finally, not able to hold back, he asked:

"Sunny... are you really not going to join us? Don't... don't you see that we only have one chance to escape this place? Not to mention all the lives we can save!"

Sunny shrugged. To be honest, he wasn't entirely sure on that point himself. On one hand, he had no desire of helping Nephis achieve her insane goal. On the other hand, things that she had set in motion were going to happen with or without him.

What was he going to do, hide in his cathedral and wait until there was no one else left alive on the Forgotten Shore?

Some fate that would be...

"Maybe I'll join you, and maybe I won't. Who knows what will happen?"

He fell silent and cast a sideways glance at Cassie.

Actually, at least three people here knew what would happen... more or less.

'It's hard to escape fate.'

"That's not the point though, is it? The point is that you should conclude our deal first and do whatever it is you wish to do later..."

Changing Star faced the two of them and calmly ended that conversation:

"Sure. No problem. We'll go to the cathedral first. A deal is a deal, after all."

Sunny smiled with satisfaction.

Nephis glanced at him and added:

"But, Sunny... how exactly are we supposed to kill a Fallen Devil?"

His smile widened.

"Oh! I'm glad that you asked..."

Sunny had been making plans on how exactly to kill the Black Knight for more than half a year now. Prior to leaving the Dark City, he had spent two entire months observing the terrifying fiend and trying to learn everything there was to know about him.

Needless to say, the task of slaying a creature that powerful was not going to be trivial. In fact, it was going to be the hardest battle they had fought yet.

It almost seemed impossible.

But was it, really?

The fight against the Spire Messenger, who had turned to be a Fallen Monster, nearly cost several members of the cohort their lives. They had barely been able to hold off against the creature of its class, and a devil was ten times more dreadful.

However, there was a big difference between the Messenger they had faced and the Black Knight.

That difference was, basically, very simple.

It was that Sunny did not hate the Messenger with all his dark, vindictive heart.

And now, that hate was going to tip the scales in their favor.

Chapter 266: The Devil You Know

At the core of it, things were indeed rather simple. Sunny hated the Black Knight enough to do his due diligence and thus spent an incredible amount of time studying it. He was so motivated to kill the creature that had hurt him that he had even gone so far as to settle in the same old cathedral as the devil.

As a result, Sunny had become a singular expert on everything having to do with the Black Knight. He knew his strengths, he knew his weaknesses, the patterns of his behavior...

And, most importantly, he knew what type of unnatural powers the devil possessed.

Unlike Nightmare Creatures of lower ranks, devils had access to bizarre and harrowing powers that were akin to the Aspect Abilities of the Awakened. That was what made them so dangerous, and that was why the fact that Sunny had learned the Black Knight's power was so vital.

Unlike the Spire Messenger, whom they had to fight blind, the cohort was going to go into battle with the Fallen Devil fully aware of what they would face. As such, they could plan, come up with strategies, and make preparations.

Knowing your enemy was half the victory.

The second half was knowing yourself.

The smile disappeared from Sunny's face. Leaning forward, he said:

"The Black Knight is truly a living nightmare. He is as strong, fast, and indestructible as you would imagine a Fallen Devil to be. I've seen countless creatures fall to his sword — no matter their shape, size, rank, or class. He is just too powerful."

Effie giggled.

"You're not really making your case, Sunny. You know that, right?"

He glanced at her and grinned.

"That's not even the worst part. What really makes him an incarnation of death is not his astonishing might, but the darkness that lives in the grand hall of the cathedral and seems to obey him. When wrapped in that darkness, the Black Knight can move fast, unseen, and without making a single sound. His physical traits are vastly enhanced, turning him into an unstoppable engine of slaughter."

Sunny grimaced.

"What's more, any damage done to him is instantly repaired as long as he is surrounded by the darkness. Inside of it, he is basically immortal."

The members of the cohort glanced at each other with dubious expressions. Only Changing Star remained indifferent.

A tentative smile appeared on Sunny's face. Turning to Nephis, he said:

"But that is where you come in, Neph. With your radiant light, that darkness will vanish. Your flames can strip the bastard of his greatest weapon. Without his dark power, the Black Knight is nothing more than a powerful abomination. He will be only slightly more dangerous than a demon of the same rank."

Caster stared at him and said, his voice flat:

"You say it as though a Fallen Demon is an easy enemy to face."

Sunny shook his head.

"No, I am not saying that. I fully understand how hard that fight will be. In fact, I understand it better than any of you. The truth of the matter is that even with the Dawn Shard, our weapons won't be able to wound him. Not because his flesh is too tough, but because he is covered in heavy armor from head to toe. I am not even sure that there is any flesh beneath it, to be

honest. There is only one chink in his armor, and that is the visor of the helmet."

The Black Knight had two burning red embers instead of eyes, so Sunny didn't even know if the bastard had a face.

Kai shifted a little and said with uncertainty:

"So the only way to kill him is to hit the crack of the visor? I am... I am not sure that this is possible. On a fixed target, sure. But on a moving one, especially one that fast and deadly... I can't promise that I'll manage that."

The others nodded, expressing their agreement.

Sunny smiled.

"Ah, yes. That would indeed be tough. Luckily, we don't have to."

He paused for a moment, and then revealed the secret that had taken him a long, long time to uncover:

"The truth is, the visor is a trap. It seems like a weak spot, but it's not. The real weakness of the Black Knight is not even protected by the armor."

A dark expression appeared on his face.

"It's his sword."

Indeed, after observing the devil for months, Sunny had come to the conclusion that the secret to destroying the damned thing hid not in finding a way to pierce the bastard's armor, but in destroying his terrifying greatsword.

By watching the Black Knight fight against countless Nightmare Creatures, Sunny had been able to notice a curious pattern. Just like the members of the cohort, the abominations who wandered into the cathedral tended to instinctively go for the eyes of its guardian. But the bastard didn't care about those attacks at all.

He did, however, tend to protect his sword against most powerful blows, going so far as to receive them with his body instead of blocking or deflecting them with the obliterating black blade. As if wary of any damage being done to it.

By focusing on this pattern, Sunny had confirmed that the sword was indeed the only thing that the Fallen Devil seemed to be reluctant to put in harm's way.

It was his true weakness.

Nephis tilted her head slightly and echoes his words:

"...His sword?"

Sunny nodded.

"Yes. If we want to kill the Black Knight, we will have to destroy his greatsword. That is the only way."

Effie blinked a couple of times, then glared at him in outrage.

"Is that what you call not being protected by the armor? Of course it's not protected by the armor! Because it's even tougher than the armor, you doofus!"

She shook her head.

"How are we supposed to break a sword fit to be wielded by a Fallen Devil? Huh?"

Sunny smiled.

"Oh, you don't have to. In fact, I insist that you don't. You are there to help me, but no one can kill that bastard except for me. No one, you understand? So, your task will be to hold that fiend off. Leave the sword to me."

The huntress scoffed.

"That's not really an answer. If none of us is strong enough to even come close to breaking such a powerful armament, how are you going to destroy it?"

Sunny stared at her for a bit, then shrugged.

"I am not going to destroy it. Do I look like someone who can destroy it? No, I don't. And I can't."

A dark grin appeared on his lips.

"...But the Stone Saint? I am willing to bet that she can."

She was able to slaughter two Fallen Beasts before even becoming his Shadow. Not that Sunny's own shadow had grown strong with almost a thousand fragments fueling it with power, there were very few things in the Dark City that the Saint couldn't destroy with its help.

So yes, he was willing to bet that she would be able to break the sword of the Black Knight.

In fact, he was going to bet his life on it.

Chapter 267: Let There Be Light

Two days later, they entered the Dark City once again.

Nephis was right — no one from the Castle was there to ambush them. Gunlaug seemed to be content letting them come to him instead, so his Hunters and the dreadful hunchback were nowhere to be seen.

Just as well.

The cohort scaled the impregnable grey wall late in the evening and spent the night in one of its towers — almost like how Sunny, Neph, and Cassie had done all that time ago.

When the morning came, they headed toward the ruined cathedral.

The ruined streets of the cursed city surrounded them once more. After months spent in the Labyrinth, their monotone colors seemed strange and bizarre. There was nothing but dark stone and dust around, with rare islands of crimson leaves and moss growing through the rubble.

And swarms of terrifying Fallen Creatures, of course.

...It was nice to be home.

Sunny caught himself thinking that and blinked. He had never thought that one day he would feel sentimental about returning to this cursed, ancient prison. And yet, there was a strange feeling of comfort deep in his heart now. It had been there ever since they had crested the city wall.

'What weird creatures we humans are. Truly, there is nothing we can't get used to.'

Glancing at his companions, he noticed that they were feeling the same way — especially Effie, who had spent years surviving, hunting, and even thriving on the streets of the Dark City.

She even called it a paradise once.

...The only kind that humans deserved.

Sunny sighed. Regardless of the strange ideas the huntress had, he believed that humans weren't meant to live in a paradise.

If they were to ever find one, they would quickly turn it into hell.

...Just like what the humans trapped on the Forgotten Shore were doing right now.

Soon, the ruins of the magnificent cathedral were in front of them. The members of the cohort stopped some distance away, looking at the ancient temple with dark expressions. The journey through the Dark City had turned out to be uneventful thanks to Effie's masterful guidance and the shadow scouting ahead to help her learn of any dangers ahead of time.

But the real danger hid at the end of the path, and now, they had reached it.

Sunny had spent the last two days teaching the rest of the group everything that he knew about how the Black Devil fought, what his habits were, and how they had to approach the upcoming battle. They were as ready as they were ever going to be.

Turning to them, he lingered for a few moments, and then said:

"...Remember — I must be the one to deal the final blow. It is very important to me."

Looking at him with a complicated expression, Kai sighed.

"Why are you so obsessed with killing this devil, Sunny? Won't it be better to leave that creature be? I just don't understand this whole endeavor."

Sunny smiled.

"Have you ever been gutted, Kai? And I don't mean emotionally. I mean literally, with a sharp piece of metal?"

The charming archer shivered.

"Uh... no. Were you?"

The smile disappeared from Sunny's face.

"Yes. I was. That bastard over there cut me open with his big sharp sword and left me bleeding to death in a ditch. So... it's only fair that I do something similar to him, is it not? I don't know how it works with you citizen folks, but out in the outskirts, you don't let things like that go. Simple as that."

The day you let a person who hurt you walk free was the day you announced to the world that anyone could stomp on you with impunity. After that, it was a short road to the grave... or worse.

So people in the outskirts were very serious about their grudges.

Granted, the Black Knight was not really a person. But the same principle applied.

Kai stared at him with a complicated expression, then asked in a strange voice:

"Really? Then... how did you survive?"

Sunny turned away and moved his shoulders slightly.

"A combination of good Attributes and powerful Memories. That's how I survived. Well... most of me did."

With that, he shook his head and gritted his teeth in anger.

"Enough talk. You all know the plan... so let's get it over with."

Today, Sunny was going to reach the pinnacle of his hunter career.

He was going to hunt the devil.

Inside the tenebrous grand hall of the majestic cathedral, darkness reigned unopposed. It drowned the vast hall, clinging to its walls and tall columns. The rare beams of light falling through the narrow windows only served to make it seem deeper.

Six humans entered the temple, the light of their lantern Memories failing to pierce the veil of darkness even slightly.

For a moment, there was utter silence. And then, a sudden yell broke it apart:

"Now!"

A tall young woman with silver hair and calm, striking grey eyes raised her sword. Then, a wave of brilliant white light shone from it, reaching far and wide. The darkness was instantly torn apart and obliterated, vanishing into the deepest, darkest corners of the cathedral.

...And there, right in front of them, a giant clad in black steel armor was revealed, his sword already on its way to reap the lives of unfortunate fools who had dared to desecrate the silence of the ancient temple.

The greatsword he wielded seemed as heavy as the stone pillars that supported the roof of the temple. Falling from above, it looked like a vertical tear in reality that revealed the impenetrable darkness hiding beneath.

What could stop such a monstrous blow?

...Perhaps the shield that contained the weight of the heavens themselves could.

Effie dashed forward, raising the Dusk Shard. The heavy shield received the terrible impact of the devil's unstoppable attack. A deafening sound of steel

clashing against steel rolled across the grand hall like a sound shockwave, growing louder as it reflected from the stone walls.

The shield held.

The floor beneath Effie's feet, however, did not. It cracked and shattered, sending the huntress reeling back. A pained yelp escaped from her lips.

The Black Knight lingered for a moment, seemingly surprised by the obliteration of the darkness that had shrouded him.

However, his hesitation lasted only for a fraction of a second — not nearly enough for the humans to prepare themselves for his next attack.

...And it was already coming.

Without paying any attention to Effie, who was flying back, the devil turned with astonishing swiftness and aimed his sword at Nephis.

But before he could perform his second strike, a massive piece of rubble the size of an adult human suddenly flew through the air and crashed into the armored giant at full speed. All the Black Knight could do was lean forward and meet it with his shoulder.

The boulder exploded into a thousand pieces, leaving the devil unscathed.

The creature that threw it walked through the dust with utter indifference, two ruby flames burning behind the visor of her helmet.

The Stone Saint had arrived to face the Black Knight.

Chapter 268: Clash | Shadow Slave

The Stone Saint walked toward the Black Knight with stalwart indifference. Her body shone with dark radiance, and there were wisps of ghostly grey fog dancing on her elegant armor. The ruby eyes of the taciturn monster burned with menacing crimson flames.

The darkness that served the devil had been vanquished by Changing Star's incandescent light, but the shadows populating the ancient temple only grew deeper because of it. Now, they were shifting, as if reaching toward the Saint to fall upon her shoulders like a mantle.

Without slowing down, the Shadow raised her shield and hit its rim twice with the edge of her sword, as though challenging the Black Knight to a battle. FREE WEB NOVEL. COM

With the two creatures finally facing each other, it became even more apparent that there was a mysterious connection between the two of them. Despite the fact that the Black Knight towered above the graceful living statue, their general appearance and the design of their armaments were eerily similar.

It was just that in front of the intricate stonelike armor of the Shadow, the devil's own formidable full plate, which had been masterfully forged from indestructible black steel, seemed almost... crude.

Facing the original masterpiece, he looked like a clumsy imposter.

Sunny knew that his intuition was right when he caught a hint of the same dim, nascent emotion that the Shadow had shown toward the walking colossus.

Despite the fact that the Fallen Devil was vastly more powerful than her and both outclassed and outranked her, witnessing him, the Stone Saint felt nothing but disdain.

Contempt, even.

All of these observations had not taken Sunny more than half a second. In the next moment, both creatures dashed forward and collided in a furious clangor of metal.

The battle had begun!

Now that his core was close to being saturated to the brim by the shadow fragments Sunny had collected from hundreds of Nightmare Creatures — and a few humans — the augmentation provided by the shadow was able to make him powerful enough to almost reach the level of an actual Awakened.

By the same logic, the Stone Saint should have been brought very close to the power level of a Fallen abomination. Sunny even suspected that she was enhanced by the shadow even more than he would be himself. The Shadow and the shadow seemed to intertwine perfectly, almost as if this was the true purpose of the augmenting facet of his Aspect.

The Saint had slaughtered two Fallen Beasts even before becoming a Shadow, although it had been at the cost of her life. What would she be able to do now, reborn and reinforced by the mystical power of his divine Aspect?

...Kill a deadly bastard of a Fallen Devil, hopefully.

But still, the gap between the two of them was just too vast. Even with the help of the shadow, the Stone Saint was clearly not a match for the Black Knight in terms of sheer power.

Luckily, she was not alone.

As the two creatures collided and turned into a whirlwind of steel, the humans joined the fight to support their monster.

Caster appeared at a terrible speed, striking at the giant black sword with his elegant jian. The ghostly green blade slid off the surface of the

greatsword without any result, but the impact of his strike managed to slow the Black Knight by a fraction of a second.

That was all the Stone Saint needed to deliver a blow of her own. Closing the distance to the giant fiend in order to turn his size and reach superiority against him, she struck upward at the pommel of the greatsword with her shield. The hands of the Black Knight were thrown above his head, and using that opening, she bulldozed into his abdomen with her shoulder, sending the giant reeling.

The violence of the impact was so fierce that several fractures appeared on the surface of her stonelike pauldron. As the dull metal sound rang across the grand hall, shards of stone flew into the air.

But it was not in vain. The momentary gap in the defense of the devil allowed Nephis to deliver a devastating thrust with her silver longsword.

Enhanced by the annihilating white flame and the miraculous enchantment of the Dawn Shard, the sword hit against the breastplate of the Black Knight's armor...

And broke through, sinking deep into the body of the fiend.

For a moment, everyone froze, stunned at the ease with which they were able to pierce the seemingly impregnable armor of the Fallen Devil. Just a moment before, Caster's sword didn't even leave a scratch on the black steel of the fiend's greatsword...

But then, things took a sharp turn for the worse.

The Black Knight did not seem to care about several inches of incandescent steel penetrating his chest at all. Regaining his balance, he indifferently swiped his sword down, forcing both Nephis and the Stone Saint to stagger back. The black blade hit the marble floor, causing the ground to shake and throwing Nephis to the ground.

Before anyone could react, the devil let go of the hilt of his sword with one hand and delivered a shattering backhanded blow to the Shadow. The

strength of that strike would have been enough to pulverize any human, but the Stone Saint was made of a far more enduring material than flesh. Still, the living statue was thrown back like a broken doll.

Almost instantly, the Black Knight turned to Nephis once more. The terrifying sword flew into the air, ready to split her apart.

'I was right!'

A savage smile appeared on Sunny's face. Brandishing the Midnight Shard, he dashed forward and screamed:

"...Plan C!"

Plan C was very simple. It was born out of the prediction Sunny had made when discussing how they were going to kill the devil. He had suspected all along that since Neph was a perfect counter to the Black Knight's most dreadful power, he would concentrate all his attention on dealing with her first.

In short, the devil was going to make killing Changing Star his number one priority.

Nephis was indeed a perfect counter against the living darkness, but even better than that...

She was the perfect bait.

Chapter 269: Incarnation Of Death

The black blade fell down, missing Nephis only by a hair's breadth. She rolled back and performed an impossible handspring, launching herself into the air from the ground. Landing on the marble floor with an effortless grace of a trained acrobat, Changing Star slid back a few meters and came to a stop some distance away from the devil.

But he was just as fast... no, much faster. The giant was already lunging forward to skewer her on the tip of his terrible greatsword. She shifted slightly, dodging the deadly attack, and dashed forward along the vast length of the black blade. Her sword flashed through the air and impacted against the vambrace of the menacing armor, leaving a deep scratch on its dark surface.

...Everything was happening so fast that other members of the cohort were having trouble joining the fight. The Stone Saint had just landed on the marble floor a moment ago and was currently rising back to her feet. Effie had recovered from receiving the full brunt of the Black Knight's first attack and was rushing forward, but she was still a few meters away.

Kai had drawn his bow, but couldn't send an arrow flying without the risk of hitting one of his companions. With how potent the enchantment of the Blood Arrow was, this was something he could not allow to happen.

Cassie mostly relied on Echoes to fight, and since they were not enhanced by the Dawn Shard, their utility in this battle would not have been high. More than that, they risked being destroyed by a single strike from the devil. As such, she was relegated to holding back for now, and would only join the fight if things really went south.

So for now, it was up to Sunny and Caster to slow the fiend down.

Their only saving grace, and the point that Sunny had explained in detail, was that the terrifying greatsword, while deadly and utterly unstoppable — well, almost — was ultimately an unwieldy weapon.

The Black Knight was strong enough to throw it around as though the giant blade weighed no more than a feather and skilled enough to turn momentum and inertia into useful tools as opposed to obstacles, but he still had to obey the laws of physics. Even more importantly, the damn thing was very long.

Which meant that they had to stick to the Fallen Devil like glue in order to use its long reach against him.

As the steel giant sidestepped and pulled his greatsword into a vicious horizontal swipe aimed at Changing Star, Sunny closed the distance between them and approached the devil from the opposite side. The Midnight Shard flashed, striking at the elbow joint of the plate armor.

All Sunny achieved was leave a small scratch on it, but he also pushed the Black Knight's hand down and closer to his body a bit, changing the angle of the swipe slightly. At the same time, Caster dove under the terrible blade and suddenly appeared right in front of the devil, thrusting his jian at the steel helmet.

The Black Knight just turned his head slightly, causing the ghostly green blade to slide off the helmet without doing any damage. At the same time, he let go of the sword with one hand and threw his elbow back, almost smashing Sunny's skull in.

...All the while continuing his deadly strike at Nephis.

Nevertheless, their tandem attack helped Changing Star avoid being cut in half. Taking a swift step forward, she raised her own sword and received the blow on its blade. Since she had time to close the distance and was now mere centimeters away from the devil, the part of the greatsword that hit her was close to the cross-guard, and as such, did not carry too much destructive force.

Still, it was enough to send her crashing onto the ground, the sword sliding from her hand.

Even with the three of them fighting together, they couldn't slow the cursed creature for more than a moment.

But then, a moment was all they needed. Because it gave Effie enough time to rejoin the fight.

It also gave Kai the opportunity to take a shot.

A black arrow streaked through the air... and plunged right into the crack of the devil's visor.

Sunny noticed a startled expression on the charming archer's face. He himself was stunned, too: no one had expected Kai to actually hit the bastard right in the only chink in his armor, least of all Kai himself.

The head of the Black Knight was violently jerked backward.

...But in the next moment, Kai staggered and groaned.

'Curse it! Why am I always right?!'

Sunny had anticipated that result, too. He had guessed a long time ago that there was no flesh beneath the menacing black armor. Rather, the armor itself was the Nightmare Creature, or at least the vessel for the evil soul of a powerful revenant. As such, there was no blood for the ghastly arrow to drink. That's why Kai had been affected by the backlash of his Fallen Memory despite hitting his target.

Just in case something like that happened, Sunny had tasked the charming archer with fashioning a few mundane arrows out of splinters of bone that was everywhere on the Forgotten Shore.

So Kai wasn't entirely out of the fight, yet. However, the amount of damage he would be able to do to the terrifying devil was not extremely low.

'Damnation!'

But Sunny had no time to lament this turn of events. The battle was only growing more chaotic and fierce...

Thanks to the incredible precision of Kai's shot, the Black Knight was disoriented for a moment. Effie arrived just at the right time to use it to their advantage. Leaning low, she used the momentum of her lunge and the bone-breaking weight of the Dusk Shard to deliver a devastating blow to the thigh of the steel giant. As another shockwave of sound rolled through the grand hall, the fiend staggered.

But a fraction of a second later, he brought his armored fist down on the mighty huntress, causing her to reel away with a pained scream. The pommel of the black sword lurched forward, catching Caster in the chest despite how fast the proud Legacy was moving. He crumbled to the floor like a broken mannequin.

Lastly, the Black Knight turned his blade to Sunny, causing him to retreat.

The damn bastard was simply unstoppable. None of their attacks had achieved anything except for annoying him a little.

'Not good, not good...'

...Pushing herself off the ground, Nephis looked at the Fallen Devil that towered above her like a bastion of darkness. Her face was pale, and there was blood flowing from her mouth.

What's worse, the silver sword had slid far away and was now out of her reach. The incandescent radiance disappeared from its blade, allowing for the darkness that hid in the corners of the grand hall to slowly begin crawling back.

Nothing stood between her and the Black Knight anymore.

Suddenly opening his eyes wide, Sunny glanced into the depths of the cathedral.

And then, a simple scream escaped from his lips:

"Neth! Run!"

Chapter 270: Runaway | Shadow Slave

As the silver sword was extinguished, Changing Star lingered for a moment. White flames ignited in her eyes, and suddenly, the pristine white breastplate of the Starlight Legion Armor was enveloped in blinding white light.

The darkness that had begun to seep back into the grand hall of the ancient temple reeled away once more. It appeared as though Nephis changed the target of her miraculous Aspect Ability and used her armor as its conduit instead of the sword.

But from the side, it simply looked like there was a furious white star burning in her chest.

...That momentary delay almost cost her her life.

As soon as Sunny's scream echoed through the cathedral, the terrifying black blade came down once again. This time, Nephis seemingly had no chance to escape.

But, somehow, she did.

Pushing herself off the marble floor, she twisted her body and barely avoided the falling guillotine of the Black Knight's greatsword, then swiftly rolled away. The next moment, she was already on her feet.

As the devil lunged forward to crush her, Changing Star did something that no one would ever expect the proud daughter of the Immortal Flame Clan to do.

She turned her back to the enemy... and ran.

From their early days in the Labyrinth, Sunny knew that Nephis could be incredibly fast when she wanted to. And indeed, just a second later, she was already far away. Cursing under his breath, he followed.

p??da n?vel No matter how fast Nephis was, the Black Knight was faster.

The devil was already pursuing his runaway prey, moving with a celerity that seemed strange for a creature of his size, especially one clad in an incredibly heavy suit of steel armor. With each moment, he drew closer and closer to Changing Star, his sword ready to reap her life.

Straining his muscles to their limit, Sunny ran as fast as he could, too, desperately trying to catch up to them. With Effie and Caster temporary put out of commission and Cassie and Kai sidelined, he was the only one left. He had to make it in time, no matter what.

If he didn't...

'Come on!'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny somehow managed to accelerate even more.

Nephis was already halfway through the grand hall of the cathedral. The statue of the nameless goddess on the far side of it must have appeared in her sight.

It was then when she suddenly stopped and turned around, sliding on the marble floor a few meters because of the momentum. The silver sword had already been dismissed and summoned back from her Soul Sea.

It seemed as though out of desperation, Nephis decided to mount one last, suicidal attack on the swiftly approaching steel giant. Or maybe she had just gone crazy.

But it only seemed that way.

...The corners of Sunny's mouth curled upward.

'That's my girl!'

Plan C was about to come to fruition. Changing Star had performed her role perfectly.

Well, what else did Sunny expect from her?

All that remained was to stall the Black Knight for a few seconds.

The devil descended upon the silver-haired girl in a fury of obliterating black steel. Nephis met him with her usual calm resolve, dodging strike after strike with incredible skill. Just like a lifetime ago, when she had been facing Caster at the dojo of the Academy, she used her understanding and control of the flow of combat to breach the gap in speed between her and her opponent.

She wasn't as much reacting to the deadly blows delivered by the devil as predicting them, moving to evade the strikes of the black greatsword before they could even happen.

Of course, this deadly dance could not last. The tiniest of mistakes would have been her last. And even if she didn't make any, Nephis was not going to be able to keep this level of concentration for long, not to mention the insane toll this fearsome clash took on her stamina and endurance.

But she didn't have to. All she needed to do was to keep the bastard busy for a couple of seconds.

And when those seconds ran out...

A sudden crack of breaking stone resounded in the darkness of the ancient temple.

In all the commotion, the Stone Saint had strangely disappeared. After Sunny had confirmed that the Fallen Devil was targeting Nephis above everyone else, their strongest combatant — his Shadow — was nowhere to be seen.

That, of course, was on purpose. She was laying the groundwork for the plan to work while the rest of them kept the Black Knight distracted.

The plan, however, could only happen in a certain spot in the grand hall. That was where Changing Star had to lure the Black Knight in case he fixated on her. Following the descriptions provided to her by Sunny, she led the devil deeper into the cathedral and stopped just in the right place.

And then, she engaged him in a fierce battle to give the Sait time to close the trap.

...Which she did by taking a running start and crashing with all her weight into one of the tall, magnificent pillars supporting the roof of the cathedral.

This pillar, in particular, was damaged at the base, making it uniquely unstable. Sunny knew every corner of the ruined temple like the palm of his hand, so he knew about this flaw of the pillar as well.

That had been what he based Plan C on.

As Sunny ran, he could see everything that followed in all its majestic brutality.

The breaking of stone resounded in the vast hall of the ancient temple. A net of cracks appeared on the massive, incredibly tall column and quickly spread to a deep gash in its base. Shards of stone flew in every direction, and the column began to topple.

It seemed slow at first. But in fact, it wasn't.

In the center of the hall, the Black Knight paused his relentless onslaught for a moment and turned his head, following the sound of cracking stone.

...He was a second too late.

As Nephis dashed away, the pillar fell on the devil, crushing him under countless tons of hard stone.

Chapter 271: Insurmountable | Shadow Slave

The massive pillar plummeted down and fell right on the Black Knight. The devil turned slightly at the last moment, lowering his sword to the ground. His crimson eyes flashed with unassailable menace.

As a thunderous crash resounded in the dark hall of the ruined cathedral, pieces of stone and clouds of dust flew into the air.

'Got you!'

A feeling of savage joy ignited in Sunny's heart. Without slowing down, he dove into the dust.

Of course, he didn't think the fiend would be destroyed by his trap. But it had to do some damage to the fearsome black armor, at least.

Nearing the place where he had last seen the tall dark figure, Sunny witnessed an incredible sight. The pillar... was floating high above the ground, its crushing weight resting on the shoulder of the steel giant. In the place of the impact, its surface had cracked and shattered.

The Black Knight, however, had not escaped unscathed as well.

His heavy breastplate fractured, revealing nothing but a mass of impenetrable, living darkness within. The pauldron on the shoulder that had received the blow was practically destroyed, leaving that whole arm hanging listlessly, twisted at a strange angle.

The helmet of the devil was dented and covered by a net of small cracks, each seeping with ghostly crimson light.

The Black Knight did not look good, if utterly terrifying.

What was even better, though, was the fact that he was currently stuck under the pillar, unable to move.

Sunny had to make use of that situation...

But before he could, the devil raised his broken arm and placed it on the column. Then, he lowered his head, as though gathering his strength... and effortlessly threw the monumental stone pillar into the air.

Sunny's eyes widened.

Diving down, he barely avoided the flying wall of granite. The pillar flew above his head and crashed down onto the marble floor, then rolled several times and came to a rest in a deafening rumble of shattering stone. The length of it blocked the grand hall, cutting the way for the rest of the cohort.

And also Sunny's path of retreat.

...Not that he had any plans of retreating.

Regaining his balance, Sunny brandished the Midnight Shard and dashed toward the wounded Black Knight for a vicious attack.

Both he and the Stone Saint arrived at the same time.

However, the Fallen Devil was still a force to be reckoned with. Despite the fact that his armor was cracked and his speed was somewhat diminished, there was still enough power in his body to obliterate all of them.

Holding the greatsword with one hand, he suddenly pulled it into a fearsome slash. The black blade whistled through the air, cutting a chaotic arc around the fiend.

Sunny was forced to jump back, but the Shadow managed to deflect the blow with her shield and redirect its power, slowing down only a little.

In the next moment, she closed the distance to the Black Knight and delivered a terrible strike of her own, aiming at the base of his sword's blade.

The Knight simply moved the sword away, then violently bashed her in the head with the pommel, casing bits of the stonelike metal to fly into the air.

The Saint staggered back, the visor of her helmet shattered.

...Unlike the mass of darkness hiding in the black suit of steel armor, there was an actual face beneath hers.

Sunny allowed himself to stare for a fraction of a second. This was his first time seeing the face of his Shadow, after all.

The Stone Saint looked just how he had imagined. Her skin was grey like granite, and the features of her face were almost like that of a human — with the exception that they were just too flawless. It was as though she had not been born, but actually cut from stone by a mad sculptor, one obsessed with absolute perfection.

As the result, what should have been beautiful looked eerie and hideous instead. In fact, glancing at the inhumanly perfect face of his Shadow, Sunny felt nothing but a cold sense of revulsion.

...Fright, even.

The fact that her haunting face was utterly devoid of any hint of human emotion only made it even more disturbing.

The Shadow caught herself from falling and dashed to the side, avoiding another strike from the terrifying giant, which was effortlessly chained after the first one. The greatsword fell down once more, shattering the marble plates of the floor in the spot she had been just a moment ago.

It was then that Nephis rejoined the fight.

The three of them attacked the Black Knight simultaneously, perfectly coordinating their assault. Changing Star threw her longsword forward, aiming to sever the broken arm of the devil entirely.

The Stone Saint went after the greatsword again.

And Sunny did something crazy.

Dashing to the enormous black blade, he... stepped on its surface and ran up, using it as a ladder. He had a solid second of stability before the greatsword was pulled into another attack. Feeling it moving beneath his feet, Sunny used the momentum to jump up and grab onto the helmet of the terrifying fiend.

Mounting the devil, he hung from the Black Knight's neck and delivered a savage stab at his shoulder. His aim was just a centimeter away from the edge of the pauldron.

Sunny's hand was empty when he started the strike, but by the time it reached its mark, the Moon Shard was already grasped in it.

During their journey back to the Dark City, he had noticed that Ascended Memories received a less dramatic enhancement from the Crown of Dawn. Unlike the Awakened ones, they weren't elevated by almost an entire rank in terms of power. The augmentation, however, was still significant.

Enough to breach the gap between the ghostly stiletto and the armor of the Fallen Devil, at least.

The needle-sharp point of the Moon Shard broke through the impenetrable steel and sunk deep into the shoulder joint of the indestructible black armor.

Obviously, Sunny knew that this strike would not do a lot of damage to the fiend. But dealing damage was not his goal.

Devil or not, Fallen or not, the Black Knight still had to obey the laws of physics. In particular, having several inches of steel... glass?... stuck in the joint of his armor was inevitably going to reduce the mobility of his arm.

Indeed, with both of his arms damaged, the speed with which the fiend was able to move his greatsword around considerably diminished. It was still utterly terrifying, nevertheless.

But not insurmountable anymore.

Just a moment faster than the Black Knight, the Stone Saint stepped over the black blade and pinned it to the floor with one of her grieves. Using all of her weight to keep it down, she threw her sword aside and raised her shield high above her head with both hands.

p??da n?vel For a moment, time slowed down.

And then the Shadow brought the shield down, delivering a devastating blow to the weakest point of the greatsword.

The rim of the stone shield hit against the black steel...

And with a deafening ringing, the greatsword shattered.

Chapter 272: Shadow And Darkness

Augmented by the shadow and with the help of nine hundred fragments that Sunny had collected, the Saint had become incredibly strong. The graceful stone body of the taciturn monster hid incredible power to begin with, and now, it was vastly enhanced.

Holding her shield with both hands, the Shadow delivered a devastating blow at the weakest point of the black blade. The blade, which was pinned between the marble floor and her greave, rang deafeningly... and shattered.

Still mounting the Black Knight, Sunny grinned with vicious joy.

Then, he let go of the dented helmet of the devil and pushed himself off, performing a backward flip and landing nimbly several meters away.

Nephis immediately disengaged, too.

Both of them knew that there nothing was more dangerous than an enemy on the brink of death. With nothing to lose, humans often relinquished any sense of self-preservation and turned berserk, taking their killer with them to the grave.

Nightmare Creatures were much the same, only more terrifying.

Despite the fact that Sunny was sure that the devil's weakness hid in his sword, he wasn't certain what would happen if the blade was actually broken. Hopefully, the Black Knight would just crumble into a pile of steel.

If not... it would be better to be far away when they found out.

As the shards of the black blade rained on the floor and the Stone Saint fell on one knee, a shudder ran through the devil's body. The darkness hiding in the corners of the ruined cathedral suddenly boiled and lunged forward in a wave.

But none of it reached the Black Knight, annihilated by the radiance of Changing Star's intricate white armor.

The devil froze in a twisted pose, his hands powerlessly hanging down, his back bent. The black steel of his armor was... rusting. It was swiftly turning dull brown, its luster gone, its once impregnable surface looking corroded and brittle.

Then, he slowly and laboriously raised his head and turned it slightly to the side. As if staring at the face of the nameless goddess whose statue oversaw the dark hall of the ruined cathedral for thousands of years.

As the devil looked at the goddess, the crimson light of his eyes slowly weakened and dimmed...

...And then, suddenly, exploded into furious red flames.

The rusty armor came apart, exposing the mass of darkness hiding within. The darkness stretched its limbs and rose above the kneeling Shadow, the parts of the armor that floated in it giving the creature a vaguely humanoid shape.

Revealing its true form.

A ghostly colossus made of darkness and rusting steel towered above the taciturn monster like an omen of death, two crimson fires burning furiously in the black depths. Another flame appeared just beneath them, like a twisted mouth made from the flames of hell.

And then, a terrifying roar shook the ancient temple.

Sunny took an involuntary step back, a feeling of dread rising from the depths of his soul. His eyes searched for Nephis and found her standing a few meters behind the Stone Saint. Changing Star was hesitating, looking at the dark apparition with an uncertain expression.

She caught his gaze, lingered for a moment and then nodded, understanding what Sunny wanted to convey without the need for any words. Then,

Nephis cautiously backed away, not letting the devil out of her sight.

What was going to happen next was not something a human could survive. Not a Sleeper, at least.

With a harrowing fury, the creature of darkness crashed down on the Shadow. Its hands tore through the air and wrapped around the taciturn monster's neck, then raised the living statue in the air as if her stone body weighed nothing.

The devil brought the Saint high above the marble floor of the ruined cathedral and squeezed her neck, as if trying to strangle the her. A net of cracks streaked through the Shadow's armor, bits of stone falling down.

...Through all of it, the emotionless expression on the hauntingly inhuman face of the Saint did not change one bit.

But in her ruby eyes, a hint of a feeling appeared, much stronger than ever before.

p??da n?vel ...Disdain.

Letting go of the shield, she raised her hands, grasped the vambraces of the rusting armor, and easily shattered them in her grip.

As another roar resounded in the darkness, the taciturn monster fell back to the ground. Landing with nimble grace, she instantly dodged the claws of the apparition, which had bent down to shatter the living statue once and for all. Then, she took a step forward.

The Stone Saint was right beneath the leaning devil now.

As her ruby eyes flashed with ruthlessness, she lunged forward and delivered a crushing blow to his chest. Her gauntlet tore through the breastplate of the rusted armor and sank deep into the living darkness, right where a human heart would have been.

...Or a soul core.

A moment later, the crimson flames burning in the depths of the dark creature exploded into a wave of blinding red light.

...And disappeared.

The dark essence of the devil dissipated like fog, its remnants vanquished by Changing Star's radiance. The pieces of armor fell to the ground in a clangor of steel.

The terrifying devil of the cathedral, the Black Knight, was dead.

Sunny threw his head back and let out an exhilarated, vengeful laugh.

'Die! Die, you bastard! Die and go to hell, forever!'

Oh, revenge tasted so great!

A moment later, the voice of the Spell whispered sweetly into his ear:

[You have slain a Fallen Devil, Forsaken Knight.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Sunny smiled.

'Anything else you want to add? A Memory? An... an Echo?'

However, a moment later, he forgot all about the Spell. A cold shiver run down his spine.

Because right in front of him, something very strange was happening to the Stone Saint.

Her hand was still raised, frozen in the same position as when she had pierced the heart of the living darkness with her fist.

And in it...

'What the hell is that thing?!'

Chapter 273: Chrysalis | Shadow Slave

Grasped in the Shadow's fist was a strange, beautiful, and ominous gem. It was utterly black, as though suffused with impenetrable darkness. The glossy black surface seemed to devour light, turning the vast hall of the ruined cathedral even darker than it had been before.

Deep within that black void, crimson flames burned with a menacing red glow. It was pulsating in a slow and bizarre rhythm, drowning everything around in dim red light. Painted by it, the Stone Saint seemed to be drenched in blood. The gem she held looked like a bloody, still-beating heart that she had torn out of someone's chest.

Gazing at it, Sunny felt a strange sense of foreboding.

'What the hell is this thing?'

The gem looked sort of like a soul shard, but... different. He had never seen a black shard, to begin with, or one radiating such an intense glow. It also didn't seem like a piece of a broken core. On the contrary, it appeared... whole?

'Is that what a soul core of a Nightmare Creature looks like?'

No, not a soul core.

A soul?

Stunned, Sunny counted the crimson flames burning in the depths of the black gem. One, two, three... four.

Four flames for the four cores of Fallen Devil.

The thing that his Shadow held in her hand was the Black Knight's soul... or some sort of his essence, at least. By how had it turned into a material form?

Did the Stone Saint do it? If so, how... no, why?

'What is she doing with it?!

As Sunny and Nephis looked in stunned silence, the Shadow finally moved. Bringing the black gem close to her face, she lingered for a moment. A hint of a dark, macabre emotion appeared in her eyes.

And then, the Stone Saint... swallowed it.

Sunny blinked.

'...What?'

The Shadow opened her mouth, bit into the eerie crystal, and swallowed it.

Just like that, the soul of the Black Knight was devoured. The red glow it emanated disappeared, returning the world to its natural shade.

And a moment after that, the Stone Saint fell into the shadows and disappeared, too.

'Wait... I didn't dismiss her. What the hell is happening?'

Nephis looked at him with a perplexed expression.

"What just happened? What did she do?"

For once, Sunny didn't have to twist the truth and deceive anyone. Opening his mouth, he honestly said:

"I have no idea."

Walking over to the pile of rusty steel that remained after the devil had been destroyed, Sunny moved it around with his foot for a bit and then mumbled:

"There's no shards left. It's empty."

Changing Star remained silent for a few moments, then frowned.

Finally, she said:

"...You Echo is very peculiar."

While everyone was recovering from the fight and tending to their wounds, Sunny walked to a secluded corner and dove into the Soul Sea.

The tranquil expanse of still water met him with familiar silence. Glancing at the rows of motionless shadows standing at the edge of it, Sunny noticed that the Black Knight had joined their ranks.

The steel giant stood among all the other creatures Sunny had slain, just as empty as the rest of them. There was no trace of the menacing and deadly Fallen Devil left. Now, he was just one of the shadows.

Sunny grinned.

"Welcome, you bastard. Make yourself at home. You're not going anywhere else ever, anyway."

A feeling of deep, dark satisfaction grasped his heart. Staring at the motionless form of his sworn enemy, Sunny had to stop himself from kicking the Black Knight with all his strength.

He was just a shadow now, after all. Kicking him would have been like kicking the air. Plus, Sunny wasn't vindictive to that degree. Killing the bastard once was enough for him.

"Who's the one laughing now, huh? I won't deny it, you got me good. But I'm still breathing while you're dead. At the end of the day, that's all that matter."

This world — no, both this world and the real one were full of creatures that were bigger, stronger, and more powerful than Sunny. Many of them had either threatened his existence or felt compelled to treat him like dirt to show their superiority.

But he was still here despite all of them, neither destroyed nor subjugated. He was free, alive, and growing stronger with each day.

One day, they would be the ones cowering in front of him or be destroyed by him. Just like the Black Knight had been.

With a dark expression, Sunny turned away and walked to stand beneath the black sun of his shadow core. Then, he summoned the Stone Saint.

...But nothing happened.

Sunny frowned, then repeated the summon again — to the same effect. Suddenly worried, he willed the runes to appear in the air in front of him.

Luckily, his worst fears did not come true. The Stone Saint was still listed as his Shadow.

'Then what is going on with her?'

Concentrating on the runes describing her name, Sunny made it expand and read:

Shadow: Stone Saint.

Shadow Rank: Awakened.

Shadow Class: Monster.

Shadow Attributes: [Battle Master], [Stalwart], [Spark of Divinity].

Shadow Description: [Shadow Saint was created by the treacherous Lost from Light in the cursed darkness of the Forgotten Shore.]

Shadow Fragments: [80/200].

So far, everything was the same. Even the number of shadow fragments he had fed her did not change.

However, there was a new string of runes shimmering beneath that number, where nothing had been before.

When Sunny saw it, his eyes widened.

The runes read:

[...The Stone Saint is evolving.]

He lingered for a few moments, and then looked up at the Shadow Core.

Somehow, somewhere inside, his Shadow was resting in the waves of nurturing dark flames, her very being going through a mysterious transformation. It appeared as though consuming the soul of the Black Knight had allowed her to enter a stage of growth that Sunny had not anticipated.

How long would that evolution process take?

And what kind of a transformation the Saint was going through?

Sunny had no idea.

However, he couldn't wait to find out.

Chapter 274: Salvation | Shadow Slave

Evolving... the Stone Saint was evolving.

Leaving the mindscape of the Soul Sea, Sunny furrowed his brow. His eyes, however, were full of excitement.

What exactly about her was going to change, though?

There weren't that many possibilities. It could be either her rank, her class, or her attributes.

It was logical to assume that by defeating an opponent of a higher rank, the Shadow would be able to ascend to a new rank herself. However, there was a flaw in that logic.

The Black Knight wasn't the first Fallen creature Sunny and the Saint had slain. In fact, he was the third, with the Corpse Eater and the Spire Messenger being the first two. That's not even counting the two Iron Spiders the living statue had butchered before falling to Sunny's blade herself.

But she had not done anything like pulling a black gem out of their corpses before.

So, most likely, what allowed her to absorb the soul of that particular Nightmare Creature was not the mere fact of its incredible power, it was the strange but obvious kinship that the two of them shared. At least Sunny felt that this guess of his was right.

That didn't help him understand what changes would occur to the taciturn monsters, though. Still, it was a very valuable piece of information to learn.

In the future, if Sunny wanted to evolve his Shadows, he would have to find not only a powerful, but also a suitable opponent for them to defeat. A kindred abomination of higher rank or class.

Tilting his head, he tried to remember if there was another creature on the Forgotten Shore he knew of whose soul could be fed to the Saint. For a moment, the image of the walking colossus appeared in his mind.

'Yeah, no. Not gonna even think about that.'

Shaking his head, Sunny smiled slightly and walked over to his companions.

Now that their deal had been concluded...

The future he was so afraid of was finally upon them.

The light of lanterns invaded the spacious room that had once belonged to the priestess of this ancient temple. With six people entering its peaceful haven, however, it didn't seem so vast anymore.

Sunny looked around and sighed. The hidden quarters were just like he had left him. There were pieces of simple, but luxurious furniture carved out of pale wood, with a few mismatched things that he had scavenged from the ruins. The stone walls were decorated with intricate engravings. An empty chest that used to be full of shimmering soul shards stood dark and empty.

Feeding the Stone Saint had really bankrupted him. Sadly, being the master of a hungry Shadow was not the cheapest of ambitions...

On one of the walls, sets of lines were scratched into the stone, marking all the days he had spent living in the ruined cathedral. For a long time, this had been his home. The best home he ever had, really, which was a sad thing to say about a windowless stone room hidden in the middle of a cursed city.

But Sunny liked it a lot. He was going to miss this dark, quiet place very much.

The other members of the cohort, with the exception of Effie and Cassie, were looking around with interest. Even Neph showed a bit of curiosity.

With a strange look on his face, Kai turned to Sunny and asked:

"This... this is where you lived?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow and shrugged.

"Yeah. Why?"

The beautiful archer smiled with visible delight.

"No, nothing. It's just that... this place is so tasteful! I did not expect your residence to be this chic."

'What is that supposed to mean?'

Sunny frowned.

"...What did you expect it to be?"

Kai looked down, suddenly flustered.

"Oh, you know. For some reason, I always imagined you sleeping on a floor in a cave. Yeah, stupid, I know. Why would there be a cave in a temple?"

Hearing that, Effie couldn't help but laugh.

"Uh... wait till you see what's in his closet, Night."

Sunny gave her a menacing look, but thought better of saying anything.

He understood that the huntress was just trying to lighten the mood.

Knowing what was going to come next, every member of the cohort was consumed by fear and doubt right now. Effie more than the rest, because her role in the spectacle that Gunalug had planned for them was especially cruel.

Sunny sighed.

A bit later, they were sitting around the hearth, the smell of food still lingering in the air. Everyone was silent, looking at the fire, their minds consumed with dark thoughts. Sunny knew that he had to make a decision now, but felt reluctant to do so.

Instead, he just watched the shadows dance on the walls of the hidden chamber.

After a while, Nephis finally broke the silence. Turning to him, she lingered for a bit, and then asked:

"We will be leaving in the morning. Will you come with us?"

Her voice sounded even, as always. But Sunny knew her well enough to discern notes of a suppressed emotion in it.

Hope...

'Hope is the poison that will get you killed.'

But no. This was the old Sunny talking. One who was comfortable hiding behind his insanity, one who had given up. Who was too afraid to face the ruthless truth and pay the price to take what belonged to him, was his by right.

Triumph. Salvation.

...And hope.

Sunny was done being afraid.

With a calm expression, he looked at Nephis and said:

"The day after tomorrow. I still have things to finish in the Dark City. I will join you the day after tomorrow... for better or worse."

She was silent for a few moments, and then a soft smile appeared on her face.

"...Thank you. I have some preparations to make, too. We will return to the Bright Castle together, then."

He gave her a nod and turned away.

Nephis had never shown any sign of being able to feel fear, at least not that he remembered. But he knew that it was just a front. In fact, she knew fear all too well. Better than anyone here, except maybe for him.

She was introduced to it at a very young age, after all.

So he suspected that behind her indifferent face and even voice, she must have been scared, too. She was just a young girl, after all.

And it was she who was going to fight the immortal Bright Lord to the death soon, not them.

Sunny looked at the shadows.

'One day. After one day, the prophecy will begin to come true.'

Chapter 275: Secrets of the Ruined Temple

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As soon as the dawn came, bringing with it the mournful sound of retreating waves, Nephis and her cohort left the ruined cathedral.

Sunny remained alone, standing on the edge between the darkness of the old temple and the light of the new day.

Lingering in the ornate doorway, he remained motionless for a while and watched as the artificial sun rose into the bleak grey skies above the cursed city. After months spent in the company of other humans, being by himself once again felt strange... just like it had felt strange to be with other people after all the time he had spent on his own here before that.

Turning around, Sunny returned into the darkness.

The grand hall of the ruined cathedral was peaceful and quiet. Without the menacing steel guardian, there was no one here to disturb the silence anymore. Even the darkness that populated the corners was empty and docile now, not at all the living entity it had been once.

...It felt sort of lonesome.

Freely walking through the echoing expanse of the magnificent hall, Sunny looked around, taking in the sight of the cathedral that had sheltered in the past from a new perspective. Despite spending so much time here, he had never seen it like this — in the same way the inhabitants of the Dark City must have seen it all those years ago. Sunny had only looked down on the hall from the height of one of the ancient temple's support beams.

It looked majestic.

But it was also not safe anymore.

With the Black Knight dead, no one was left to defend the cathedral from the Nightmare Creatures that would want to claim it as their nest. So Sunny couldn't stay here for long.

Not that he had the luxury of that choice anymore.

Throwing one last look at the beautiful dark hall, Sunny sighed and began climbing the statue of the nameless goddess.

Back in the hidden chamber, it was once again utterly dark. Sunny hesitated for a bit and began collecting his belongings.

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It didn't take him long.

Growing attached to material things was pointless on the Forgotten Shore. There was no way to take them with him to the real world, after all — if he was even going to survive that long.

But he still felt sad leaving all of his spoils behind. Back in the real world, Sunny never had a home like this, nor a lot of stuff to call his own. He had dreamed of enjoying a lavish lifestyle after becoming an Awakened, but got stuck in this hell instead. This spacious room he called his home was a form of consolation.

But now he had to leave.

In the end, he only took the bare necessities and then tidied the place up, wishing to leave it clean and orderly despite knowing that there was little chance of anyone stumbling on this place again.

After everything was done, Sunny glanced at the tranquil room and hesitated for a bit.

Then, he walked over to the wall where he had once scratched countless lines into the stone to count the days and summoned the Prowling Thorn.

He wanted to leave a mark of his presence here. Something to tell that he had lived in this hidden chamber, in the ancient ruined cathedral, in the Dark City, on the Forgotten Shore...

In this world. A small mark to witness that he had been here, had struggled here, and then left to fight for a chance to escape.

Sunny wanted to come up with some profound words, but nothing came to mind. He wasn't really a profound person, anyway.

What he really wanted to carve into the wall was his True Name. But even now, the paranoia stopped him. What if someone would come here one day and read it out loud? What a funny disaster that would be.

Finally, he raised the kunai and carved something beneath the lines that marked the days he had spent living in the ruined cathedral.

Then, Sunny turned around and walked away.

There were two runes left on the wall behind him.

One meaning sun.

The other meaning loss.

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There were two things Sunny wanted to accomplish before tomorrow morning. One was in the ruins of a library that he had never finished exploring, and the other one was right here in the ruined cathedral.

Returning to the grand hall with his rucksack on his shoulder, Sunny walked past the statue of the nameless goddess and dove into one of the doors leading into the temple's inner sanctum.

He had never been there before, kept away by the living darkness and the Black Knight.

But now that the devil was gone, Sunny was finally going to see what was hidden inside.

Walking through the rooms and corridors that the priests and priestesses had once used, he looked around and didn't notice anything of interest. Everything was pretty much destroyed and ruined, with only a few mundane things remaining untouched.

There was nothing here at all — at least that was what others would think.

Sunny, however, suddenly stopped in front of a certain wall and tilted his head.

There was nothing special about that wall, at least nothing that could be seen. But he could feel a heavy mass of shadows hiding behind it, as though there was a hollow space there.

After searching for a while, he found a hidden lever and pressed it.

Or at least he tried. The ancient mechanism had rusted through and disintegrated over the thousands of years of neglect, of course.

With a sigh, Sunny summoned the Midnight Shard, looked closer at the hollow wall, and inserted the tachi into the seam between its moving parts. Then, he unceremoniously used the unbreakable blade as a lever and pushed with all his inhuman strength.

With a terrible scraping sound, a part of the wall slid away. The air rushed past Sunny, entering the dark mouth of a narrow corridor.

Behind it, a set of stone stairs led down.

Deep down underground.

With a resentful grimace, Sunny flourished the Midnight Shard to shake off the dust that clung to it, put it on his shoulder, and entered the secret passage.

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Chapter 277: Demon of Fate

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Sunny held his breath, affected by the disturbing scene in front of him.

The corpse was kneeling on the floor of the small cell, its hand chained to the floor. There was a circle carved into the stone around it, with countless symbols that Sunny could not understand surrounding it.

However, the circle was broken. In the thousands of years since the fall of the Dark City, the floor of the dungeon cell had cracked, with several fractures running straight through the intricate engraving.

Whatever it was the circle was meant to contain had either perished or escaped a long time ago.

Now, the only thing that remained was a withered corpse.

Coming closer, Sunny took another look at the person who had been imprisoned and died under the ruined cathedral, in a cell situated exactly beneath the statue of the nameless goddess.

Because of the dark mantle and the black lacquered mask, Sunny couldn't glean a lot of information about the corpse. It seemed to belong to a human, but other than that, everything about it was a mystery.

What terrible sin had this person committed to be condemned to this awful death?

Strangely, Sunny's intuition was silent. It was as though there was nothing in front of him at all. To his sixth sense, the prisoner of the underground cell appeared as an empty space.

'...Weird. This person had clearly been either hated or feared a lot to be locked behind all these barriers. Surely, finding such a creature would affect my fate... why don't I feel anything, then?'

With a tense frown, he took a deep breath and carefully stepped inside the circle.

...It was then that Sunny noticed a chaotic mess of runes drawn on the floor near the prisoner's left hand. The sight of them almost sent him into a seizure.

Staggering away, Sunny fell to his knees and threw up.

'Agh... damn it!'

Those runes... those were the same runes the Spell used to describe the mysterious Unknown. Only here, the intensity of the terrible effect they had on the mind of anyone who saw them was much, much stronger.

'What the hell?'

Wiping his mouth, Sunny grimaced and glanced at the masked corpse with a bit of resentment.

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Then, he picked himself off the floor, took a deep breath... a looked at the terrible runes once again.

Immediately, Sunny felt a splitting headache and a sickening, terrible sensation spreading through his mind. It was as though all his thoughts and memories were being torn and twisted. But despite all of it, Sunny persevered and kept staring at the final message that the prisoner had left behind.

He knew he couldn't read the runes — he didn't know that particular language, and the Spell either was forbidden, incapable, or refused to translate them. But for some reason, Sunny felt compelled to try.

Fighting through the intense pain, he slowly studied the strange runes. And then, suddenly, his eyes widened.

Because right below the chaotic mess of them, a line of text was written in the script he was familiar with — the usual runic language that the Spell always used.

This time, it did not provide any translation. Luckily, Sunny had studied these runes and knew enough about them to understand what was written himself.

The last thing the person imprisoned under the cathedral wrote before succumbing to death made him shudder.

Scratched into the stone was a short prayer:

"Hail Weaver

Demon of Fate

Firstborn

of the -unknown-"

Sunny stared at the runes until he was on the verge of losing consciousness. Only then did he turn away and closed his eyes.

The nauseating dissonance of the terrible runes stayed carved into his mind. Only after several minutes passed did it fade a little, allowing him to breathe again.

So... the mysterious Weaver whose forbidden lineage he had inherited was, in fact, associated with fate. Just like Sunny himself.

What were the chances?

'...That's Fated for you, I guess.'

The word he translated as "Demon" wasn't the one used to describe Nightmares Creatures of the third rank, but a different one.

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Perhaps calling it a spirit or a daemon would have been more suitable — a mortal, but powerful and ominous deity. One different from gods, but sharing the same nature. However, Sunny wasn't that versed in mystical terminology. All he knew was that the runic language was incredibly rich in words describing all types of monsters and creatures, while the human language wasn't.

Hence "Demon" was fine with him.

Apart from the tantalizing revelation about the mysterious Weaver, he had noticed one other important thing by forcing himself to study the runes.

Before, Sunny had thought that there was a single entity that the Spell refused to call by its name and simply described as "-unknown-" — leading him to call it the Unknown.

...Yes, Sunny was not that imaginative when it came to word choice.

Whether the Unknown were a kind of beings, a single existence, or a force of nature, he did not know.

But now, he realized that there were actually two types of forbidden runes, and two things that the Spell did not know how or did not want to mention.

One was the same as those used in the description of the Drop of Ichor, which stated that the Vile Thieving Bird was hated both by the gods and by the Unknown. It also said that the reflection of the Unknown stayed forever frozen in the depths of Weaver's pupils, and that just looking at it drove the Thieving Bird mad.

The other was the same as those used in the description of the Stone Saint, which was created by "the last child of the -unknown-", and now here by the dead prisoner, who had called Weaver the firstborn of the "-unknown-".

'What the hell does all of this supposed to mean?'

His suspicion that Weaver had something to do with the creation of the Nightmare Spell only grew stronger after learning that he... she... it?.... they had something to do with the domain of fate. After all, the Spell seemed to be weaved out of numerous strings of fate, and there was this being called Weaver, who had the blood of gods in their veins, but was also somehow connected to the Unknown.

Feeling his headache only growing stronger, Sunny winced and shook his head.

'Later. I will think about it later.'

There would be time to ponder about all this later. Or not, if he dies trying to escape the Forgotten Shore. Either way, that time was not now.

Turning back to the chained corpse, Sunny cautiously avoided looking at the dangerous runes and kneeled in front of it.

He wanted to know what was hiding behind the mask.

But as soon as he touched it, the corpse suddenly shattered and fell apart, turning into dust right in front of his eyes. Even its dark mantle rotted and disappeared, as though the thousands of years that had passed since the fall of the Dark City and the destruction of the cathedral finally caught up with it.

Soon, all that was left was a pile of dust.

...And the lacquered mask lying on top of it, its black surface glinting slightly in the pale light of the ghostly torches.

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Chapter 278: Weaver's Mask | Shadow Slave

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Sunny looked at the black mask and the darkness hiding in its eyes. Its features were not as much contorted as fearsome by nature. It was simultaneously fearsome and somber, bestial and regal. As though existing at the border of all things.

But most of all, the striking mask radiated a sense of mystery.

The vicious fangs, the twisting horns, the black lacquered wood of it all... once again, his intuition was silent. There was nothing he felt toward the black mask, as though it didn't even exist.

'How strange.'

Sunny waited for a few moments, then picked up the mask and brought it to his face to take a closer look at it.

But just a moment after his fingers touched the sleek surface of the polished wood, the mask suddenly disintegrated into a swarm of countless white sparks. Acting like water, the stream of light flowed toward Sunny's chest and entered into his body, disappearing into the dark depths of his shadow core.

The voice of the Spell thundered suddenly, louder than it had ever been before:

[You have received a Memory.]

Sunny remained motionless for a few seconds, thinking about what just happened.

By now, he knew that some Memories could exist outside of the soul cores, just like how Shard Memories did.

Was the black mask one of them? Somehow, he felt that it wasn't.

'Why I am even guessing? Let's... let's just take a look?'

The reason he was lingering was because of the magnitude of the situation. Sunny didn't know anything about the mysterious mask, but he believed that this relic of the past was truly unusual. The circumstances that had led to its discovery were too extraordinary, and the place it was hidden in was too uncanny to think otherwise.

So he was understandably apprehensive.

With a bit of tension, Sunny dove into his Soul Sea and looked up at the spheres of light floating around the black sun of the Shadow Core. There was a new one there, which seemed to be much brighter than the rest.

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Summoning it down, he soon found himself looking into the eyes of the dark mask that hovered in front of him. It was as though he was facing an invisible person wearing it. Shifting uncomfortably, Sunny lowered his gaze a little and looked beneath the black lacquered wood.

A moment later, he had to suppress the involuntary desire to cover his eyes with a hand.

Inside the black mask, seven radiant embers were burning with such intensity that it almost blinded him. All around them, incalculable ethereal strings were weaved into a pattern so vast and intricate that it almost seemed boundless.

'Seven anchors... gods!'

Stunned by the visage of the mask's spellweave, Sunny hesitated for a bit and summoned the runes that described it. What he saw made him take a step back and gasp.

Memory: [Weaver's Mask].

Memory Rank: Divine.

Memory Tier: VII.

Memory Type: Tool.

Memory Description: [Weaver believed that knowledge was the origin of power and so always hid behind numerous lies, wearing them as a mantle. No one knew Weaver's thoughts, Weaver's face, and Weaver's heart. Even the gods could not see what hid behind the mask.]

Memory Enchantments: [Mantle of Lies], [???], [Simple Trick].

Sunny had to look away for a moment to take a breath.

'Divine Memory of the seventh tier... holy hell!'

Words weren't enough to describe his astonishment. He was, however, surprised to see that the mask only had three enchantments. Sunny expected such a powerful Memory to have dozens of them — judging by how boundless and insanely complicated the weave of it was, there had to be that much, at least.

Just what were these three enchantments to require a myriad of diamond strings to support them?

Turning back to the runes, he concentrated on the enchantments and read further:

Enchantment: [Mantle of Lies].

Enchantment Description: [Hides the identity of its master.]

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That description sounded very simple, but looking at the spellweave of the black mask, Sunny could tell that this enchantment was anything but. In

fact, it was so vast and powerful that his mind was failing to even comprehend the scale of it.

The enchantment was indeed designed to protect the identity of the person wearing the mask from prying eyes, but what it actually meant was that any form of detection was powerless against it. And Sunny suspected that "any" was not a figure of speech in this case, but simply a constation of fact.

For example, Cassie's Aspect Ability, which allowed her to see a person's Attributes, would not work on someone wearing the mask. There were countless similar abilities among the Awakened... none of which would work either.

'I guess that explains why my intuition was silent about the prisoner and the mask itself. Whatever kind of fate-related sixth sense I have is also countered by that thing.'

Even more terrifying was the fact that the enchantment was not aimed at just the Awakened. The description of the Weaver's Mask stated that even the gods could not see through it, and it was honest truth. Nothing could penetrate the barriers of the Mantle of Lies, not even the sight of a god.

Sunny gulped.

'...Scarry.'

But then, this incredible and frightening enchantment did not even take up a tenth of the volume of the ethereal diamond strings hiding beneath the surface of the black lacquered mask.

The second enchantment was much the same.

It was called [???], by which the Spell was telling Sunny that it wasn't going to say anything about it. Its description was also empty.

However, Sunny could tell that it had something to do with sight just by looking at the weave. He could also tell that it was not a passive

enchantment, but an active one, meaning that currently, he could not access it.

Usually, that would mean that he would be able to once he became a true Awakened, but in this case, the amount of soul essence required to keep the enchantment activated for more than a fraction of a second was so vast that no Awakened would have been able to. Only a Saint would, perhaps.

However, Sunny was not sure that he wanted to try even if he had the ability. The things Weaver saw were capable of driving Unholy creatures insane, so it was wise to avoid going anywhere near that enchantment in the future... most likely.

...Most of the spellweave of the Weaver's Mask, however, was dedicated to the third enchantment, one that was called a "Simple Trick". Judging by the mind-boggling complexity of the pattern that made it possible, that trick of Weaver's was anything but simple, though.

It was the most bizarre, intricate, and ingenious thing that Sunny had ever seen.

Curious, he glanced at the description... and froze, his eyes opened wide.

The runes gleaming in the air read:

Enchantment: [Simple Trick].

Enchantment Description: [Reverses the effect of one's Flaw.]

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Chapter 279: Guilty Conscience | Shadow Slave

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Sunny remained silent for a long time, staring at the black mask. The tranquil sea of his soul was still and silent... not at all like the storm that was currently raging in his heart.

After a while, he thought:

'That Weaver was one sly guy... girl... person... being? Well, the fact that I don't even know that much only serves to prove the point. And I thought I was good at deceit and manipulation.'

How devious one must be to not let even the gods, even the Nightmare Spell know anything about them?

But it was fitting, in a strange kind of way. If Weaver's domain was that of fate, there was no other way. Fate was a terrifying, but subtle tool. Manipulating it to your advantage required a very special kind of genius, one that was directly opposite to any kind of directness, straightforwardness, and brutal power.

However, if given the choice, Sunny would have preferred to face War God in battle than to make someone like Weaver his enemy.

Masterful liars were far more dangerous than deadly warriors. He knew it better than most.

...Exiting the Soul Sea, Sunny hesitated for a little and then summoned the Weaver's Mask. The cool wooden surface of the mask appeared on his face, held in place by some invisible force.

Immediately, his vision changed slightly. Everything became sharper, clearer, more vivid. Sunny could feel the mask reaching into his eyes and connecting to something — the strange legacy he had inherited by

consuming the drop of Weaver's blood. He sensed his intuition becoming more potent, too.

It was as though he could almost see the mysterious strings of fate that span across the entire world.

...Almost.

Glancing at the pile of dust that remained of the prisoner, Sunny frowned slightly.

The identity of the person who had been wearing the Weaver's Mask remained a secret. Just who had this corpse belonged to, and how had they ended up chained to the floor in a hidden dungeon cell beneath the majestic cathedral?

The easiest thing to assume was that it was Weaver themselves, but Sunny dismissed that theory immediately.

From everything he knew about the original master of the mask, the power of that creature was just below that of the gods... and that of the Unknown, perhaps. If Weaver appeared on the Forgotten Shore, the whole Dark City would have been wiped out of existence before any harm was done to them.

So who could have been wearing Weaver's Mask? Some powerful carrier of the Nightmare Spell that had received it as a Memory, just how Sunny did?

'Well...'

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If Weaver was really a daemon, which was a strange kind of a lesser deity, were there a cult dedicated to them? Had there been priests and followers of Weaver? The message the prisoner had left behind sounded awfully close to a prayer. Had that person been deemed a heretic and condemned to this place for that reason?

Sunny sighed. There was no way to know.

Hesitating for a bit, he turned away and left the somber dungeon cell behind. He only had this one day to finish all the things he had left undone in the Dark City. There was no time for fruitless pondering.

Once outside, Sunny walked over to the place where he had left his shadow and took a look at himself through its eyes. What he saw made him blink a couple of times.

'Huh...'

The black lacquered mask sat snugly on his face, hiding his features. He couldn't even see his eyes, which were drowned in darkness.

What's more, even his height was somehow unclear. Sunny didn't actually become taller, but from the side, it looked as though he did... sort of? One second, it did, and the next one, it did not. It was sort of similar to how people's faces changed when lighted from different directions. In any case, he couldn't tell for sure how tall the person facing the shadow was.

'How fun!'

It was not that Sunny became completely unrecognizable, though. He would still have to be careful to hide the context clues about himself while wearing the mask. Mundane things like the way he walked, his usual mannerisms, and other subtle but unique details of his behavior could still betray his identity despite the fact that it was masked from all unnatural means of detection.

To truly make himself appear as something else, Sunny would have to put on a performance.

...Good thing he was practicing the Shadow Dance, then. Was it not designed to fully imitate someone else's battle style and physicality?

'What a wonderful coincidence...'

Finally, the moment he had been dreading came. It was time to test if the [Simple Trick] was really capable of turning his Flaw upside down.

Needless to say, Sunny was nervous. His lips became dry, and he unconsciously tried to lick them... but now there was a mask on his face, so he couldn't. That bad habit of his had to be put to rest, apparently.

'...Great. Alright, let's do this.'

Opening his mouth, Sunny said out loud:

"I am... very tall!"

In the process, he grimaced, expecting the familiar pain to invade his mind.

...But there was nothing.

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Sunny froze, blinked a couple of times, and waited. Still, nothing happened.

Beneath the mask, a wide grin appeared on his face.

"I am not only tall, but also exquisitely handsome. But that is not all, I am incredibly honest and nice, too. Every girl I meet immediately falls in love with me. Boys, too! That's just how lovable, handsome, nice and tall I am. Everything I have just said is absolutely true."

His mind was peaceful and quiet. There was no pain, no pressure. In fact, Sunny felt great.

'Wow...'

Feeling an almost overwhelming desire to continue spouting lies, he laughed in exhilaration.

"Amazing! This can be..."

But then, a tremendous explosion of pain suddenly threw him to the ground. With a startled yelp, Sunny grasped his head and then groaned through gritted teeth, feeling as though it was about to burst.

'What the hell?!'

He just wanted to say how useful the ability to lie could be.

'Wait...'

The ability to lie would, indeed, be very useful. Which meant that by stating that fact, he would be telling the truth.

And the Weaver's Mask did not remove his Flaw, just reversed it.

So... it seemed like while wearing it, Sunny could not tell even a word of truth.

'Uh...'

That seemed like the right conclusion to make. But he needed to test it to be absolutely sure.

With a doomed sigh, Sunny waited for a moment and then said:

"My name is..."

A moment later, another pained scream resounded in the darkness of the underground chamber.

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Chapter 276 Black Door | Shadow Slave

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Chapter 276 Black Door

The hidden passage led Sunny underground, twisting and turning through the mass of stone. Despite the fact that he had been cautiously walking forward for a few minutes now, Sunny felt that he was still beneath the cathedral. In fact, by his estimation, he was approaching its center.

And indeed, right beneath the spot where the statue of the goddess should have been, the narrow passage opened into a larger room. In it, a deep well leading even further down was situated, with a winding staircase spiraling down into the darkness.

Sunny frowned.

'What is it with this place and creepy dark wells?'

Going further down was going to place him dangerously close to the catacombs. He knew all too well what kind of danger that would pose — the last time Sunny had ventured into the maze of ancient tunnels below the city, he barely escaped alive.

After hesitating for a while, he stepped onto the staircase and began descending. Deep, ancient shadows surrounded Sunny, giving him a little comfort.

At least he was among his kin.

After a minute or so of walking down the stairwell, Sunny entered a large chamber that seemed to be carved into the bedrock, as opposed to being constructed by human hand. On the other side of it, a large door forged from black steel stood, illuminated by two burning torches.

Two thoughts entered Sunny's mind simultaneously.

The first one was that the metal from which the monolithic door was made looked eerily familiar. It was the same dark, lusterless, impenetrable alloy that the Black Knight had been made of.

The second thought was even more disturbing.

'...How come those torches are still burning?'

Had they been aflame for several thousand years?

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Come to think of it, the torches looked very strange. They seemed to be producing light, but it was pale and ghostly. There was no heat that came with it, too.

The shadows cast by the ghostly flames were the most disturbing, though. Because of the movements of the fire, they were supposed to be dancing on the floor. But instead, the shadows were absolutely motionless. It was as though the light of the torches had trapped and paralyzed them somehow.

Sunny thought for a while, and that ordered his own shadow to stay back. The shadow did not protest — in fact, it was visibly relieved. Taking a few exaggerated steps back, it merged with the deep darkness at the exit of the stairwell and waited there, glancing nervously at the strange motionless shadows from time to time.

Sunny cautiously approached the black door and lowered the Midnight Shard into a protective stance. He was ready to face any sort of danger.

...But nothing attacked him.

The only thing that happened was a sudden shill that run through Sunny's body when he had entered the circle of light cast by the two ghostly torches.

'These torches are... they are definitely some sort of a protective charm. I am almost sure that their power can harm even shadows.'

The question he had to ask himself, though, was this — were the torches meant to keep something from entering the space that hid behind the black door...

Or were they meant to keep something in?panda-novel,c,om

Well... there was only one way to find out.

What Sunny was doing seemed absolutely crazy. But in fact, it was not. He had not come into this underground chamber just because of idle curiosity or because of being blinded by greed and the prospect of finding a treasure.

What led him here and pushed him to study the black door was his intuition.

By now, Sunny had to admit that his intuition was more than a mere manifestation of his subconscious. It had turned out to be correct one too many times.

Especially ever since he had consumed the drop of ichor.

After that day, he was able to sense the presence of divinity. And sometimes, he was even drawn to it — like he was drawn to this cathedral and to the mysterious key that lay buried in the body of the Lord of the Dead. The two seemed connected...

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And Sunny felt that he was about to find out how and why.

But it was not all his intuition was capable of. There were other aspects to it, too.

In fact, Sunny suspected that it had more to do with his [Fated] Attribute than it had to do with the [Spark of Divinity.] If he were to guess, he would say that after he had been changed by the ichor, that Attribute was slightly enhanced, giving him the ability to sense subtle tremors that ran through the strings of fate from time to time — the strings that were, apparently, tightly wrapped around his body.

The combination of the change that happened to his eyes and his close relationship with those strings gave Sunny a slight affinity to revelations and fate — similar to the one Cassie had possessed, but infinitely less potent.

It was enough to guide him to this door and make him want to open it, nevertheless.

Stepping close to the monolithic black door, Sunny gazed at it and came to the conclusion that not even an entire army would have been able to break through this monstrous barrier.

There was, however, a small keyhole hidden on its dark surface.

Pulling on the string tied around his neck, Sunny took off the small metal key that hung on it and gripped it tightly in his hand.

After hesitating for a few moments, he carefully inserted the key into the lock of the black door.

...It fit perfectly. As soon as Sunny put the key into the lock, the faint light of divinity it emanated suddenly became a little bit brighter.

Sunny sighed, then readied himself and turned the key.

Something clicked inside the metal door, and then it silently opened. The pale light of the ghostly torches swayed, as though moved by an otherworldly wind.

Behind the door, a small room was carved into the rock.

And in it, a corpse in a dark mantle was chained to the floor inside a circle.

Sunny couldn't tell if the corpse belonged to a man or a woman, because there was a strange mask covering its face.

The mask was made out of black lacquered wood and carved to resemble the face of a ferocious demon. Its teeth were bared, with four fangs protruding from its mouth. The mask was crowned with three twisted horns.

Inside the black chasms of its eyes, there was nothing but utter darkness.

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Chapter 280: One Last Job

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Some time later, Sunny emerged from the ruins of the cathedral with a rucksack on his shoulder, took one last look back, and left.

Whatever his future was going to be, he doubted that he would come back here any time soon.

It was a bittersweet goodbye.

Cautiously walking through the familiar streets of the Dark City, where he knew every turn and every piece of rubble — in this district of it, at least — Sunny kept his guard up. Many things must have changed in the months he had been away traveling through the Labyrinth.

The Nightmare Creatures he knew and, more importantly, knew how to avoid might have wandered away or perished, and new horrors might have taken their place. He had to stay prudent and careful.

But still, his next and final goal was not that far away.

As he sneaked toward it, Sunny thought about the Weaver's Mask and the ways it could change his life. At first, he thought about simply never taking it off and walking around while delivering a deluge of lies. This way he would be safe from revealing his most guarded secret and becoming someone's slave, at least.

But after considering this seriously, he came to the conclusion that it was not the best decision in his current circumstances.

First of all, one couldn't be a part of any collective while lying all the time. Sunny had an unpleasant experience of being expelled from various groups for various reasons, and not being sincere and honest was one of the surest ways to make people want to avoid you at all cost... eventually, at least.

And no one was able to survive alone in the Dream Realm. Not in a way that a person would want to live, anyway.

Sunny knew a lot about this side of things, too.

But most importantly, he was not going to be able to keep this lying for long, anyway — not when dealing with people that already knew him. Kai and Cassie would notice the strange effect of the mask immediately: Kai because of his Ability to sense lies, Cassie because her Ability to see Attributes would suddenly stop working.

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But others would catch on that something strange was going on with him pretty quickly, too, simply because of how drastic the change in his behavior would be. Especially Nephis, who knew him so well.

After that, they would inevitably have a lot of questions, and answering those questions — even with lies — would put him in more danger than he already was in.

So, sadly, Weaver's Mask was not a panacea to Sunny's current situation. At best, it would be able to help him avoid certain predicaments if used sparingly.

But really, he didn't want anyone to know that he was in possession of that Memory at all. Sunny had to think of the future.

If he was lucky enough to survive the fall of the Bright Castle and return to the real world... that was where the black mask could create miracles for him. It would allow him to have a hidden persona that was in no way connected to an Awakened named Sunless, and as such, allow him to do and achieve things that would have been impossible or too dangerous to try as himself.

To that effect, no one could know that the strange black wooden mask was connected to him, not even people whom he... somewhat... trusted.

Both for his own good and theirs.

'It is such a pity, though.'

It was. Just imagining Caster's face if he were to ever learn about what type of treasure Sunny had somehow found this time was tempting enough to change his plans.

Caster...

Sunny's face darkened.

He had not forgotten about the promise Nephis had made him at the start of their journey to the Hollow Mountains. Tomorrow, he was finally going to learn what was the deal with the proud Legacy, and what exactly the relationship between Changing Star and him was.

...And how big were the chances of Sunny having to face Caster in battle.

Despite all his dislike for the handsome scion of the Han Li clan, Sunny was reluctant to actually fight him. No matter how much progress he had made to get ready for the bloody conclusion of this disastrous chapter of his life, Caster was still not someone to be taken lightly. He was a tremendously deadly opponent just based on what Sunny knew about him.

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And there were secrets that the Legacy had been keeping, as well.

'That charm of his... what does it do?'

He was certain that he would defeat Caster if push came to shove. But the cost he would have to pay for that victory would be heavy... perhaps much more heavy than he was willing to pay.

Suddenly uneasy, Sunny silently shook his head and continued on his way.

As the sun began to roll toward the western horizon, he approached his goal — the ruins of an ancient library that stood lonesomely among the

decimated buildings.

Back near the end of his lonely months of hunting monsters on the streets of the Dark City, Sunny had begun exploring this ruin for bits of information about the history of the Forgotten Shore. Because of his chance encounter with the Stone Saint, and then with Kai — which lead to him abandoning the ruins for a long expedition into the Labyrinth — he had never finished this project.

There was this one vast mosaic, in particular, that Sunny was interested in. It sprawled across the entire floor of the library's main hall and was mostly covered by rubble.

In the past, Sunny was not strong enough to move the rubble out of the way. He had been hoping to make the Stone Saint do it for him, but sadly, the Shadow was currently slumbering in the depths of his Shadow Core, evolving into whatever it was she was going to turn into.

Just to be sure, he checked one more time to see if the mysterious process was still going, and sighed in disappointment.

Luckily, he had grown much stronger himself during these months. Sunny was pretty sure that now, he would be able to clear the mosaic with his own two hands.

It was just going to be a lot of work.

Sending his shadow into the library to make sure that no abomination had made its nest there during his absence, Sunny entered its cool shadow of the ruin and sighed.

'...Better get started.'

Soon, the scraping sound of heavy boulders being moved could be heard under the partially collapsed roof of the ancient building.

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Chapter 281: Seven Heroes | Shadow Slave

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In the depths of the night, Sunny was finally done with the arduous task of clearing the floor of the ruined library. Tiredly standing in the center of the circular hall, he found himself in the middle of a vast mural.

The mosaic had endured the passage of time in an almost pristine condition. Most of it was preserved perfectly, with only a few small sections destroyed by corrosion or the ill will of the creature that inhabited the Crimson Spire.

By now, Sunny was certain that it was the Terror of the Forgotten Shore that had obliterated any depictions of the seven heroes' faces. He didn't know how it was possible, but felt that the same furious force that had decapitated the ancient statues was responsible for the damage done to the engravings in the ancient mine and to this mural.

It was as though the Terror wanted to erase any sign of the founders of the Starlight Legion from history. Their names were forgotten, every person that had known of their stories turned into dust, and even the stones that bore their image were desecrated and shattered.

How great the resentment that the evil creature harbored toward them must have been, for it to go to such lengths in its mad desire to obliterate their legacy?

With a sigh, Sunny turned slightly and walked to the edge of the mural. He was searching for the start of its story.

Depicted on the mural was not one image, but a long series of them, spiraling from the edges of the mosaic to its center like a long scroll. On them, the history of the land consumed by darkness was shown, ending with the coming of a new dawn.

Sunny already knew what events had brought the curse of all-consuming darkness to the Forgotten Shore and how the ancient inhabitants of this land

fought against all odds to resist it.

Now, he was going to learn the final mystery — the reason for their eventual downfall.

Finding the first image, he studied it and lingered for a bit. Then, he walked on, watching the history unfurl itself beneath his feet.

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As the curse subdued the world under the veil of everlasting darkness and terrible creatures started to attack the human settlements, one after another, mighty champions began to appear to battle them. But no matter how strong, brave, and valiant those champions were, none of them was able to resist for long.

Especially not when their own allies started turning into monsters. It was impossible to face the terrifying foes hiding in the darkness when no one was there to cover your back — or even worse, if those you trusted the most to do so were the ones delivering a deadly blow instead.

But still, humanity persisted. Months passed, then years. And eventually, a new generation grew up in this horrible world.

"Born in the all-consuming darkness, seven valiant heroes gave an oath to return the light to the cursed land." Sunny whispered. People who would later create the Starlight Legion were indeed born in the darkness. They never even saw the light that they would swear to bring back. All they knew of it were the tales their elders had told them, tales of a time when people never turned into nightmares, and the beautiful stars shone even in the darkest of nights.

This new generation grew up surrounded by nothing but darkness and horror, and was forged by it into a far more fearsome force than their parents had ever been. Hard times created hard people, and their time was as unforgiving and harrowing as one could imagine. Beyond so, even.

And so, the people it created adapted to match this dark reality.

Eventually, seven of them rose above the rest, each leading their faction in the constant battle against the encroaching doom.

Sunny stopped and studied the image that showed all seven of them... even if their faces were damaged beyond recognition.

There was a knight in an intricate plate armor forged of white metal, with a stalwart blade grasped firmly in his hands.. com

A graceful priestess in a light flowing robe, her delicate hands shining with gentle light.

A mighty hunter in an archaic cuirass leaning on a beautiful bronze spear.

A masterful builder holding a mason's hammer in his calloused hands.

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A regal lord with a humble crown resting on his head, a single gem decorating its simple design.

A subtle and merciless slayer with a ghostly stiletto hidden cunningly behind her back.

And a stranger from a misty land who wore a stonelike armor and never showed his face, with a heavy round shield resting at his feet.

Sunny looked at the seven heroes, thinking.

"Knight, Hunter, Lord, Stranger, Slayer, Builder, and Priestess. Midnight Shard, Zenith Shard, Dawn Shard, Dusk Shard, Moonlight Shard. And the other two... Sunlight Shard and Starlight Shard?"

The fate of the last two Shard Memories remained unknown to him. Nephis must have known something, though. Otherwise, she would not have ventured into the dangerous expedition to the Hollow Mountains to seek out the Crown of Dawn.

Although the history of the Forgotten Shore was presented in more detail here, it did not give him any revelations yet. Thoughtful, Sunny turned away from the image of the seven heroes and continued on.

At some point in history, the heroes came together, created the Starlight Legion, and united the surviving remnants of humanity under its banner. It was also then when they gave their defiant oath.

'They must have been mad...'

Weren't striving to achieve something impossible the definition of madness? Sunny frowned, knowing full well that, in this case, the seven heroes actually managed to fulfill their crazy ambition.

It was all a little too close to home. He also knew someone who liked to set impossible goals and had an infuriating track record of proving them possible.

But how did it all end? Yes, the heroes achieved their dream. But the Forgotten Shore still turned into a desolate hell.

What happened to their light?

Looking at the next images of the mosaic, Sunny got a feeling that he was about to find out.

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Chapter 282: Sacrifice | Shadow Slave

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As Sunny walked in circles, drawing near to the center of the mosaic, he saw the depiction of various deeds that the Starlight Legion had achieved.

The warriors led by the seven heroes were truly a fearsome force. Forged and tempered by the relentless malice of their dark world and the unassailable will of their leaders, they drowned the Forgotten Shore in the blood of the cursed creatures.

Even though many of them had turned into monsters themselves — especially those who had allowed themselves to falter in their conviction — the rest continued on, unbroken.

Sunny couldn't tell how powerful exactly the members of the legion were, but from some clues of their battles, he guessed that they were at approximately the same level as the Awakened of his own world, at least at the beginning. With time, however, it seemed as though the warriors of the cursed land had grown much stronger.

If most of the creatures they were fighting were of the Corrupted rank, then that would put the Legion far above the humans back in the real world. Sunny wasn't sure if the seven heroes and their soldiers were carriers of the Nightmare Spell, though, and if the same hierarchy of power could be applied to them.

Eventually, the surviving humans migrated to the shore of the colossal impact crater and built an impregnable wall around their new city. This endeavor alone was so arduous and ambitious that he couldn't help but feel a sense of awe.

Sunny slowed his steps.

On the images in front of him, the construction of the Crimson Spire... no, it wasn't crimson yet back then... had begun. The cyclopean tower was built

west of the city, reaching high into the sky like an axis of the world.

Like a stairwell that was designed to allow humans to touch the heavens.

This was what he was truly interested in. Sunny wanted to know what happened in the Spire, how the artificial sun was created, and how the darkness that consumed this land was turned into a transient black sea.

What he saw next made him falter, and then close his eyes with an expression of deep, exhausted resentment.

In the second to last image, the seven heroes were depicted standing apart in the seven spots of the Forgotten Shore. In front of each of them, a crowd of thousands of people kneeled, waiting.

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Among those people were the warriors of the legion and the civilians from the city, men and women, old and young.

Each of the heroes held a weapon in their hands.

'Of course. Of course, this is what happened. What else would it be?'

A feeling of dark, bitter disappointment grasped his heart. Sunny didn't even know why he felt this way. It was not like he knew anything about the seven heroes, really. But at some point, maybe because he needed to believe that there was a tiny glimmer of light in the vast and endless night, he had begun thinking of them as a symbol of the best humanity could be.

...What a foolish thought.

He of all people should have known better.

"Curse you all."

In the last image, one that took the center of the mosaic, seven tall hills made of dead bodies surrounded the Spire. Tens of thousands of people had been slaughtered, their blood flowing like rivers toward the dark tower. On

top of each hill stood one of the valiant heroes, their hands stained red to the shoulder.

As the last sacrifice, the slaughterers turned their weapons on themselves, thrusting them into their hearts.

...And somewhere out there, he knew, a tiny black seed floated in a pool of blood.

Sunny grimaced in disgust.

'This was your dream? This is how you decided to bring back the light? You sick wretches...'

As the rivers of blood flowed to the Spire, seven streams of glowing crimson light moved above them and entered it from seven directions. These streams represented the soul essence of numerous humans who had been sacrificed to create the artificial sun.

But theirs wasn't the most terrible fate.

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In the center of the Spire, a lone human figure was drawn, convulsing in harrowing agony as the raging storm of soul energy entered her body. The conflux of all that power, the sacrificial vessel meant to be its conduit. The anchor of the sun.

Sunny recognized that figure, too. To him, the features of her face were painfully familiar.

It was the same face as that of the nameless goddess whose statue stood in the ruined cathedral.

The crimson light entered her body and shot from her screaming mouth and eyes upward, pure and white. It rose to the height of the Spire, where a new sun was being born.

Frightened by its light, the darkness retreated underground, where it was locked behind seven seals that were left behind by the heroes as their last deed.

The rest was easy to deduce.

After the heroes perished to create the artificial sun, everything was fine for a while. But then, maybe after a few decades, or even hundreds of years, the light of the sun began to dim.

So the people of the Dark City had to make a new sacrifice. Perhaps, the second time, only seven people had been killed to renew the power of the Spire.

But then it happened again, and that time, seven was not enough. So they sacrificed fourteen. And when it happened again, they sacrificed a few dozen.

And eventually, hundreds of people were being slaughtered every year to keep the sun burning. Because of the simple fact that the seven heroes and their people... all of them had terribly mighty souls. But their descendants, who didn't have to grow up in utter darkness and fight terrible monsters to live through the day, did not.

And at some point in this vicious cycle, the Vessel that had been imprisoned in the Spire and served as the anchor for the bloodthirsty sun was corrupted. Whatever kind of conscience it had left had been completely shattered.

The nameless goddess of the Dark City became the Crimson Terror of the Forgotten Shore.

All that pain, all that rage, all that blood exploded from the Spire and infected the very land itself, growing into an endless labyrinth of the strange crimson coral. The seven seals came undone, releasing that darkness that had been imprisoned underground for hundreds of years.

This was what Cassie had seen in the vision.

The darkness and the fury of the newborn Terror fell on the humans of the Dark City like a tide and wiped them all out, erasing even the memory of them from the face of the world.

...This was how the Forgotten Shore was born.

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Chapter 283: Final Piece of the Puzzle

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'So this is how it is.'

Sunny stared at the last image of the mosaic, a dark and resentful expression frozen on his face.

Depicted in the center of the mural, a sun fueled by blood shone on the mountains formed by dead bodies. Tens of thousands of people had been slaughtered to create it, and thousands more must have been butchered later on to keep it burning in the indifferent sky.

The first sacrifices had died willingly, lured into submission by their fanatical rulers. What about those who came after? Somehow, Sunny doubted it.

And for what? How did it all end?

The seven seals had been broken, and the ancient civilization had been obliterated.

But the sun created and nurtured by it was not destroyed... just corrupted. It still rose in the morning and fell beyond the horizon after the dusk, illuminating the desolate hell of its own creation.

As long as its vessel, the Terror of the Crimson Spire, existed at the center of the Labyrinth, it would continue to shine in the cold grey skies. And as long as it did, the darkness that had escaped its underground prison and turned into the cursed sea was going to continue coming and going, scared of its light.

'Great. The two deserve each other...'

He didn't know why the all-consuming darkness had become a literal sea of impenetrably black water, but had a guess or two. Either hundreds of years

spent locked away behind the seals had affected it that way, or the artificial sun had.

The Terror had been changed by the curse, so why couldn't the curse be changed by the Terror in return?

'Why wasn't that sun extinguished, though?'

There was no one alive on the Forgotten Shore to make sacrifices to the Spire anymore, but Sunny suspected that there was a reason for why the crimson coral seemed to grow either out of or toward bones. If he was right, the whole Labyrinth was a giant maw with which the Terror absorbed the soul essence of every creature that bled on the coral before it died.

It was all a part of its body.

Sunny shivered, realizing that both the Labyrinth and the dark sea were, in fact, colossal living creatures. It was just that the scale of them was so boundless that they seemed like forces of nature.

Compared to the eternal struggle of the two titanic beings, the struggle of a handful of tiny humans was nothing short of insignificant.

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...Or was it?

Suddenly, he frowned.

What about Nephis and her plan? How did the Shard Memories come into all of this?

At first, a dark thought entered his mind. He imagined that Changing Star was preparing a mass sacrifice of her own, a hecatomb to appease the Crimson Terror. The number of the Sleepers being sent to the Forgotten Shore each year was too eerily similar to the number of sacrifices made to the Crimson Spire by the inhabitants of the Dark City to be a simple coincidence.

But he quickly dismissed that thought. After all, the sacrifices were meant to renew the power of the Blood Sun, and that was not Neph's goal. If anything, she meant to destroy it once and for all to gain entry to the Gateway hidden in the Spire.

So... what did it all mean?

Sunny scowled, remembering every piece of information about the seven heroes and their cursed land he knew. And most importantly, those that came directly from the Spell.

After a while, he muttered:

"...Time has erased their names and their faces, but the memory of the defiant oath still remains."

This was the second part of the description that the Spell had given the Starlight Legion Armor.

His eyes widened.

All this time, he thought that this sentence simply meant that the legacy of the seven heroes lived on even after their deaths. But now, he suddenly realized that the truth might have been far more straightforward.

The key to understanding the secret of the Shard Memories was right in front of him this whole time. In fact, it came from the first Memory he had ever gotten on the Forgotten Shore.

The Azure Blade.

"On this forgotten shore, only steel remembers," he whispered, a sudden understanding dawning on him like a revelation.

The memory of the defiant oath remained... and only steel remembered. Sunny rubbed his face.

"I am such a fool."

Everything he needed to learn the truth had been at his disposal from the very start of it all. The heroes were long gone, but their terrible oath was still here, preserved in cold steel.

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It was not the memory of it that remained... but the Memory.

The Shards were that Memory.

"Of course. It all makes so much sense now..."

But then, what was their purpose and why was Nephis so motivated to find each one?

That was easy to guess, too. Cassie had basically told him, all those months ago.

"...In the end, I saw a colossal, terrifying crimson spire. At its base, seven severed heads were guarding seven locks."

In its fury, the Terror of the Crimson Spire had beheaded the statues of its creators and brought their heads as trophies to guard the entrance to its lair... where Cassie had seen them, as well as seven mysterious locks.

What did a lock need?

A key. All locks required a key to either open them or shut them closed.

Sunny slowly exhaled.

The seven seals that kept the all-consuming darkness locked underground came undone, but they weren't destroyed. If one had all the keys, it was still possible to seal the cursed sea once again. That was what the seven heroes had left behind.

...And with the cursed darkness locked away, the Spire would lose its most deadly line of defense.

Finally, everything became clear.

Sunny remained motionless for a long time, looking at the bloody images beneath his feet. After a while, he sighed and turned away.

There was a bitter taste in his mouth.

"...Sick. I am sick of this place. So sick of all of this."

Cassie's vision showed her fire and rivers of blood?

Good.

It could all burn to the ground.

He didn't care anymore.

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Chapter 284: Nothing Serious | Shadow Slave

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In the cold light of dawn, Sunny approached the spot where the other members of the cohort and he agreed to meet. The shadow had already located their camp in the ruin of an ancient building and was currently watching them, hidden in the darkness.

The five youths were busy preparing for the last stretch of the way to the Bright Castle. They were calm and collected, not at all like people who were about to face the horrifying wrath of the Bright Lord.

What kind of horror had they not faced already?

Climbing over the rubble, Sunny let Nephis and the rest know of his approach and jumped down.

Landing just a few meters away from the group, he straightened his back and gave them an indifferent look.

"Hey."

They greeted him in a reserved manner. A palpable tension permeated the air, making everyone reluctant to speak too much. Only Effie was seemingly unaffected by this dark mood.

Leaning on a stone wall, the huntress was enthusiastically gnawing on a juicy bone. Her white teeth were effortlessly crushing it into tiny pieces, which were then chewed and swallowed along with the marrow. Noticing Sunny, she smiled.

"Hey, doofus."

He gave her a nod and wanted to turn away, but then noticed a slight frown that appeared on Effie's face. Looking at him with a bit of uncertainty, she asked:

"Uh... you alright?"

Sunny was silent for a few moments, then smiled. Finally, he said in an even tone:

"I'm perfect."

Leaving the doubtful huntress behind, he walked past Caster and approached Nephis.

The Changing Star was standing with her back to the group, looking up at the silhouette of the Bright Castle that loomed in the distance. Hearing his steps, she turned around.

The gentle light of dawn reflected in her eyes, making them appear to shine.

"...You've made it, Sunny. I am glad."

He shrugged.

"Why? You didn't expect me to show up?"

She was silent for a while, and then looked away. A lock of silver hair fell on her eyes. Nephis tucked it behind her ear and sighed.

"Could I not? It's not like I know the future."

After that, she smiled.

'...Amusing.'

In the eleven months they had spent on the Forgotten Shore, this was only the second time Sunny heard Changing Star tell a joke, and the first time it was actually funny.

If a little macabre. But what was the harm in indulging in a bit of dark humor, at this point?

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Sunny did not return the smile, however. Glancing in the direction of the Bright Castle, he asked:

"So, what's the plan?"

Nephis shrugged.

"This time there is no plan. We have confirmed that Gunlaug is still pretending to be looking for Effie to bring her to justice for killing the missing Guards. Once we enter the outer settlement, the members of the Host will come for her. Then, I will most likely be forced to challenge him. We'll... see after that."

Sunny looked at her with a dark expression.

'Pretty much exactly what I expected.'

He didn't hesitate to ask:

"Can you really break his armor? Even with the Dawn Shard, your sword is barely equal to an Ascended Memory. And that thing is a true Transcended Echo."

She lingered for a while before answering. When she finally spoke, her voice was calm and even:

"I don't have to break the armor. I just have to break the man."

Sunny shook his head with a humorless smile.

"Good luck achieving one without the other."

He paused for a moment, and then said without a hint of levity in his voice:

"Anyway. You owe me a conversation."

Changing Star glanced at him, then nodded.

"Alright. But not here."

With that, she gave the others a sign to wait and walked away. Sunny followed.

His shadow stayed, making sure that no one was going to try and eavesdrop on them. It was staring directly at Caster, following his every move with intense attention.

As they walking, Sunny suddenly said:

"By the way, I have something to tell to you, too."

Nephis glanced at him and slightly raised an eyebrow.

"Yes? What is it?"

Sunny was silent for a bit. Then, he smiled.

"Oh, it's nothing serious. Do you remember a guy called Harper?"

She frowned, then shook her head.

"Should I? Who is he?"

Sunny shrugged. His expression remained neutral.

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"Just a guy that I killed. He was one of Gunlaug's spies."

Neph looked at him for a few moments, then asked with indifferent confusion:

"What about him?"

A slight shadow ran over Sunny's face. However, his smile remained exactly the same.

"...No, nothing. Just wondered if you knew him."

When they walked far enough and were concealed from the eyes of the cohort by several tall walls, Changing Star stopped and turned to face him. Looking at Sunny, she said:

"It is good that we can speak privately. Actually, I wanted to ask you a favor."

He blinked.

'Well, that is unexpected.'

"What is it?"

She hesitated for a few moments.

"After my fight with Gunalug is over, if... when I win, I might not be in the best shape. Even if I am, there will be a flood of soul essence pouring into my body. It will incapacitate me for a bit."

The changes that happened to the body after a small portion of soul essence was consumed were subtle, but in large quantities, it could be disorienting, sometimes even debilitating for a short while.

Sometimes, experiencing these changes and getting used to them took a little time.

Sunny tilted his head.

'A flood of soul essence? What does it matter if her core is either full to the brim or at least almost saturated?'

He frowned, trying to guess what he wanted from him.

"So what do you need me to do? Keep Harus busy while you recover?"

She shook her head, then looked away.

A light sigh escaped from Changing Star's lips.

"No. I want you to make sure that Caster is nowhere near me when that happens."

Here it was. The truth was about to come out.

Sunny stared at Nephis, his expression cold and dark. After a few moments of tense silence, he asked:

"Why? What's the deal with you and Caster?"

She looked at him, her striking grey eyes calm and deep.

Then, she said:

"It's very simple, really. Caster has been sent here to kill me."

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Chapter 285: Kill Order | Shadow Slave

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Sunny remained silent for a few moments. Finally, it became clear that Nephis wasn't going to continue. Feeling a slight sense of exasperation, he asked:

"Why would Caster want to kill you?"

Despite the calm appearance, there was a tempest raging in his mind. The revelation of Caster's true intention had shaken Sunny. Yes, he disliked the proud Legacy, and yes, their dynamic with Changing Star had always been a bit strange, but he never expected to hear something like this.

In his mind, Caster was more of an opportunist with distasteful ambitions, most likely having to do with the purity of his clan's bloodline, than a cold-blooded killer.

In what world did him wishing to kill Nephis made any sense? He was her number one fan. The only logical explanation Sunny could find was that the proud scion had been secretly working for Gunlaug all along. But then, that theory also didn't hold when subjected to a close inspection — the Bright Lord was determined to kill Changing Star with his own two hands and in front of hundreds of people.

What would he need Caster for?

Nephis lingered for a bit, then shrugged.

"People have been trying to kill me for as long as I can remember. Have you forgotten?"

Sunny slowly shook his head.

"No... no, I did not. But what does that have to do with Caster?"

She smiled.

"They were not going to stop just because I came of age, survived my First Nightmare, and was sent into the Dream Realm. If anything, that would have been the perfect opportunity to finally make me disappear forever. Sleepers enter this cursed world alone, away from the protections of society and whatever allies they might have in the real one. Do you see?"

He gave her a nod, his expression growing dark.

Indeed, no one was as vulnerable as young Sleepers entering the Dream Realm for the first time.

Nephis sighed and looked away.

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"In any case, when I enrolled into the Academy, I knew that someone among our classmates had to have received orders to make sure that I never return from the Dream Realm. I just didn't know who it was."

Suddenly, she glanced at him. The corner of her lips curled upward.

"...Actually, for a long time, I thought that it was you."

Sunny blinked and stared at her in disbelief.

"What? Me? Are you cr... actually, never mind. What exactly about me made you think that I'm an agent of some secret Legacy cabal? Do I look like a Legacy to you?"

Nephis calmly looked him in the eye.

"Honestly? Not any Legacy that I know. But there were too many things about you that didn't make sense."

He frowned.

"Do tell."

She slowly raised her hand, then began counting on her fingers.

"Let's see... you claimed to be an orphan from the outskirts, but somehow managed to survive both the First Nightmare and the arrival on the Forgotten Shore. You didn't consume any soul shards, but kept growing more powerful. You said that you had never held a sword in your hand, but absorbed my lessons with astonishing speed. And finally, every other word you said was a lie, especially when it came to your origins, your past, your strength, and your Aspect."

Running out of fingers on one hand, she made a fist and pointed to it:

"Need I continue?"

Sunny cleared his throat.

"Uh, no... well, when you put it like this..."

She smiled and shook her hand, then lowered it.

"But after some time, I realized that my suspicions about you were wrong. If you were really tasked with killing me, you could have just left me on the Ashen Barrow. Back then, I was as good as dead. But you didn't. In fact, you risked a lot to take both Cassie and me with you."

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The smile slowly disappeared from her face.

"So when we reached the Bright Castle and Caster immediately appeared, insinuating his way into my inner circle, I knew pretty much instantly that it was him."

Sunny frowned.

"Aren't you getting ahead of yourself? Don't get me wrong, I'm the last person in this world who would want to defend that pompous bastard, but there were hundreds of Sleepers in our crop, and out of those, only seven were sent to the Forgotten Shore. And only four lived long enough to see

the Castle. What are the chances that the person with orders to make you vanish was among them? Isn't it a bit too big of a coincidence?"

Changing Star slowly shook her head.

"Who said it was a coincidence? People often tend to forget that the Spell has a mind of its own. It sees all and hears all. And it really loves to play with fate. If there was someone among those hundreds of people tasked with killing me, the chances of me having a fateful encounter with them in the Dream Realm would be all but guaranteed. That is how the Spell always does things."

Sunny had to agree. The Spell, indeed, loved to play with fate.

His whole damn life was proof of that.

Meanwhile, Nephis continued:

"Of course, despite my suspicions, I wasn't sure at first. But the more I observed Caster, the more convinced I became that I was right. He did everything in his power to get close to me, and then tried his hardest to subtly isolate me from everyone I could have trusted. He spent his time studying my every move, while keeping his secrets close to his chest. It's him. I've been sure of it for a long time."

Sunny tilted his head, trying to digest this new information. After a while, he asked:

"If Caster wanted to kill you, why hasn't he made a move to kill you yet?"

She lingered for a bit, then smiled slightly.

"Because among all of the humans on the Forgotten Shore, he knows what the scions of the Immortal Flame clan are capable of the best. Isn't it ironic? He respects my ability too much to be careless... maybe even fears it. And he can't allow himself to fail. His honor won't allow it. So, Caster won't attack until he is absolutely sure that I won't be able to resist. He'll make his move when I have no chance to escape."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"Let me rephrase that. If Caster wants to kill you, why is he still alive? Why didn't you kill him already?"

He was sure that if Nephis wanted to, the proud Legacy would have been dead a long time ago,

Changing Star hesitated, and then said in an even tone:

"Because I need him for what is to come. It doesn't matter that he intends to betray me. Traitor or not, he is of use."

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Chapter 286: Blessings of the Fire

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Some time later, the six of them left the secluded ruin and made their way toward the Bright Castle. The Dark City was silent and bleak, its streets devoid of life and movement. Even the Nightmare Creatures seemed to remain hidden in the lairs today, as though the feeling the tension that hung in the air like a harbinger of a disastrous change.

A lonely star was about to ignite in the sky above the cursed city.

Nephis was the first one to walk under the marble arch and step on the road that led to the outer settlement. Her face was calm and motionless, any hint of emotion hidden behind her usual mask of indifference. It was as though she was returning home in triumph, not marching to her own execution.

There was a slightly distant look in her eyes.

Sunny abandoned his usual position at the back of the group and was now walking side by side with her. Maybe it was just a whim, but he felt unwilling to follow in her footsteps as he had always done before, from the first day they met.

As they ascended the tall hill, Changing Star suddenly asked:

"Sunny, do you remember your First Nightmare well?"

Her voice sounded relaxed and idle.

He cast a sideways glance at her and hesitated for a few moments. Then, he answered in an even tone:

"Like it was yesterday."

She smiled slightly.

"Was it hard?"

Slowly, a grin appeared on his face.

"Hard? No, not hard. Impossible. It was a ghastly, despicable, and torturous ordeal. Truly the stuff of nightmares. Calling it hard would be an injustice."

With a dismissive shrug, Sunny drove the memories of the black mountain away and asked:

"...What about yours?"

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Nephis looked away, remembering. After a while, she said:

"Mine wasn't that bad, actually."

He stared at her in disbelief.

"What, you only had to kill a measly thousand Unholy Titans with your bare hands, or something like that? Knowing you, "not that bad" means that it was nothing short of a true horror show."

She slowly shook her head.

"...No. I mean it. I didn't have to fight anyone, really. Up until the very end."

Sunny blinked.

"Wait, seriously?"

A strangely sad smile appeared on her lips.

"In my First Nightmare, I was the daughter of a lighthouse keeper. My family lived in a beautiful tower on the shore of a beautiful sea. Every morning, the warm sun rose from beyond the horizon, bathing the endless expanse of azure waves in beautiful light. The winds were gentle and the

world was kind. It was me, my parents, and my younger siblings. We lived together in harmony, humbly but needing for nothing."

He frowned.

"And then what? A sea serpent destroyed the lighthouse? Some rotten horror rose from the depths?"

Changing Star's eyes became distant. A few moments passed before she spoke again:

"No. Nothing happened. That was the point of it, I think. My Nightmare... it was actually a paradise. It was everything I dreamed about when I was a little kid. Only much more wondrous and human than I could have ever imagined."

Sunny looked at her in utter shock. As he watched, the hint of sorrow disappeared from Neph's face, replaced by a subtly harsh expression.

"But that was what made it so hard to overcome. Impossible, even. Just like you said. Because all I had to do to conquer the Nightmare... all I had to do was to walk away and leave it all behind. Knowing that I could just stay there, in that paradise. Forever."

He hesitated for a while, then asked cautiously:

"So what did you do?"

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A heavy sigh escaped from Neph's lips. Her eyes grew dim.

"...I searched for a way out of the Nightmare for a long time. But no matter how hard I looked, there wasn't any. Day after day, night after night... as time went by, it became harder and harder to force myself to continue searching. I grew accustomed to that bliss, that warm and beautiful life. And eventually, a day came when I thought that, maybe, I should stop. Maybe I can just stay."

She tilted her head slightly and said, her tantalizing voice reaching the deepest, darkest parts of his heart:

"...That was the day I went to the top of the lighthouse. You see, Sunny. You have to light yourself on fire... to rip the blessings of the fire. That was what my grandmother used to say. So that was what I did. I doused myself in oil, and set myself aflame."

The white flames suddenly licked her hands, and she stared at them, her face slowly turning pale, her eyes reflecting the terrible agony she felt. As her ivory skin continuously boiled, darkened, and then healed to become pristine again, she said simply:

"...And I burned."

Suddenly, the flames disappeared, and she made a fist. Her voice grew a little strained.

"And after a long, long time, when all of it was over... I found myself in a dark cave, nestled in a slimy cocoon of black silk. All around me, thousand upon thousands of people were sleeping in similar cocoons with their eyes open, with happy smiles on their empty faces. And above us... was a creature so revolting and abhorrent that I can't bring myself to describe it to this day. It was feeding on our dreams."

She grew quiet for a bit, and then added:

"That creature was convulsing in pain, as though it shared in the agony I felt, too. Somehow, I managed to break free of the cocoon. And kill it before it fully regained its senses."

She glanced at him and smiled. However, there was no warmth in that smile.

"...That was how I conquered my First Nightmare."

Sunny looked her in the eyes for a long time, silent. Then, he slowly turned away.

"...Just as I said, the stuff of nightmares. I guess we call them that for a reason."

Changing Star laughed.

"I guess. But really, fighting that Terror wasn't the hardest part. Waking up trapped in a repulsive cocoon wasn't the hardest part. Even... even burning alive wasn't the hardest part."

She grew silent for a few moments and then said, looking at the white road beneath their feet.

"The hardest part was walking up the steps to the top of the lighthouse. Not because of what waited for me in the future, but because of what I was leaving in the past."

...Soon, the familiar shapes of the outer settlement appeared in their sight.

They had finally returned to the Bright Castle.

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Chapter 287: Lonely Star | Shadow Slave

The outer settlement had changed from the time Sunny saw it last.

At the point where the white road widened into the vast platform that the settlement stood upon, a tall stone barricade was built, with watchful sentries observing the approach to the crest of the hill. Each of them was wielding a Memory weapon and a sturdy armor, their faces full of dark determination.

The makeshift watchtower constructed on the roof of Neph's lodge loomed above them, with several archers ready to rain arrows on any Nightmare Creature that wandered close.

The slum itself was much the same, but the people populating it seemed different. Many of them were bruised and bandaged, but their eyes shone with the subtle light of hope that wasn't there or as strong before. That hope was contrasted against the suffocating feeling of tension that hung in the air. From time to time, someone would glance toward the castle and frown, a dark expression appearing on their face.

There was another detail that surprised Sunny. On the sleeves of many slum dwellers, a piece of pure white cloth was tied, as if announcing their allegiance to some god or goddess.

There had been none of that when he left this place a few months ago.

There were also graffiti drawn on the walls of the most derelict hovels, some of them depicting a shining star, some the image of a beautiful bronze spear.

'...What is that all about?'

The white armbands and the star were, obviously, meant to represent Nephis. But when had Effie suddenly become an apostle?

Glancing at the voracious huntress, he raised an eyebrow.

"Anything you want to tell me?"

She scratched the back of her head, then shrugged.

"I've become a bit of a folk hero, apparently."

Sunny shook his head and didn't press the issue.

'Whatever...'

When the sentries saw who was approaching, their faces first became shocked, and then lighted up with intense jubilation.

"Lady Nephis! It's Changing Star!"

"Lady Nephis has returned!"

"She is alive!"

The hum of voices spread through the entire settlement in an instant. If Gunlaug had not known that they were back in the Dark City, he would have learned of it now.

...But he knew, of course. He knew it long before the people of the slum ever laid their eyes on their supposed savior.

Sunny looked past the outer settlement, at the mighty walls of the Bright Castle.

How long before its Lord throws them a welcome party?

...Soon, the cohort was surrounded by a crowd of exhilarated people. Everyone wanted to see that Saint Nephis was alive and well with their own eyes. The other members were bathing in attention, too. Especially Effie.

"Effie!"

"Huntress Athena!"

"Welcome home, Effie! Show them!"

The huntress grinned in bewilderment and kept quiet.

In the crowd, there were a few faces that did not share in everyone's joy. They were the leaders of the outer settlement's hunting parties. The gazes they threw at Nephis were grim and full of meaning. She gave them a nod, letting the experienced hunters know that she understood the message they were trying to relay.

Then, Changing Star faced the inhabitants of the slum and took the bag that Effie handed her. Slowly unclasping it, she spoke, her calm voice effortlessly making the crowd grow silent.

"I am not good with words, so... please accept my gratitude, Dreamers of the Dark City. The past few months have been harsh on me and the members of my cohort, but they must have been equally as harsh on you. However, we have persevered. You here in these cursed ruins, and we out there in the ghastly depths of the Labyrinth. But all of it was not in vain."

With that, she took something from the bag and tossed it to the ground. Suddenly, a deathly silence settled over the crowd. Everyone was staring at the object laying on the stones, expressions of fear clearly written on many faces.

It was a terrifying, jagged black talon, which was as sharp and long as a sword.

And then, another one fell near it, and another, and another.

Eventually, thirty-eight of these dark blades lay in a pile in front of Nephis — thirty from the six front limbs of the Spire Messenger, and eight from the two hind ones.

Closing the bag, Nephis put it on her shoulder and said, her tone dark and piercing:

"Out there in the Labyrinth, we have fought and slew one of the cursed Messengers of the Crimson Spire. I bring you its claws as a gift, to become your weapons."

Stunned whispers ran through the crowd. The Messengers were both a symbol of terror and a symbol of hope to the people of the Dark City — terror because of their horrifying power and appetite, as well as their connection to the dreaded Spire, and hope because of the legends that once, a long time ago, a group of powerful Sleepers had managed to kill one.

And now, the legend came alive right in front of their eyes.

Nephis lingered for a moment, and then sighed, a somber note appearing in her voice.

"Many years ago, we, those who were sent to the Forgotten Shore, weren't yet imprisoned by fear. Enthrilled by the sin of those cowards who had forgotten that they are, first and forever, humans. Back then, there were people among us willing to risk their lives to conquer this hell. Escape it. The First Lord and his companions were the greatest of them. And now..."

Brilliant sparks of light suddenly appeared around her head like a sacred halo. Changing Star's eyes shined with pure white radiance, and, as the Crown of Dawn weaved itself from light and fell upon her head, she spoke.

She didn't rise or even strain her voice, but the impact of her words only grew because of it.

"...I have brought his legacy back to the Dark City. This is the crown of the First Lord. We have retrieved it from a place of eternal darkness where he had fallen in battle. He died trying to find a way out of this cursed land for all of us to follow."

She paused for a moment and then said, her face illuminated by the brilliant white flames that burned in her furious eyes.

On her forehead, the single gem decorating the Dawn Shard shone with that brilliance, too.

Almost like a third eye.

"And with it, we will finish what he started!"

Chapter 288: Progress Report | Shadow Slave

Some time later, they entered the stone lodge and found themselves in the middle of another, smaller crowd. Around thirty or forty people gathered in the main hall of Changing Star's dwelling, making it look even smaller than it had before.

However, these were not just any Sleepers from the slum. Most of them were experienced fighters from the outer settlement few hunting parties, as well as people who Nephis had recruited into her faction during her time in the Dark City.

Back when Sunny had been a part of the group, they were weak and hopeless young men and women who were barely surviving in the cruel reality of the Forgotten Shore. Now, things changed. Neph's little helpers were armed with makeshift weapons and wearing armors fashioned from a wide variety of scavenged materials, while some were even in possession of Memories. They also held themselves very differently from before.

Honestly, the difference between them and the hunters was not that big now. If Sunny didn't know which were which, he might have mistaken one for the other.

Changing Star walked through the crowd and approached the window that opened on the bleak view of the cursed ruins. She looked at it for a short moment, and then turned around, a dark expression on her face.

"...Tell me."

The leaders of the hunting parties glanced at each other. One of them, a stocky young man with long messy hair and three ugly scars running all the way from his forehead to his chin, spoke with a bit of uncertainty:

"Welcome back, Lady Nephis. It is good that you are alive and well."

She gave him a nod. The hunter paused, then continued, his voice somber:

"We, uh... have followed your orders and advice for these past months. The militia you created has been reinforced and organized to protect the settlement from the attacking monsters. With the Memories you and your cohort hunted for us in the ruins, the casualties were low both among the watchmen and among the civilians. Compared to before, I mean."

Changing Star remained silent and just stared at him. The young man sighed.

"About the other thing... it went almost exactly how you told us it would. Members of the Host came into the settlement shortly after your departure, demanding that Effie surrendered herself to be judged for the disappearance of those Guards. When we told them that she was gone, they got violent. Several people were injured, but no one died."

Effie scoffed. The hunted gave her a complicated look and scratched his cheek.

"After that, they would come again every week or so, hurt a few people and break things, always with the same demand. But we kept our cool and just... well. Took it. Like you told us to do. That seemed to only make them angrier, but they had no real reason to escalate things. In the end, they just settled for making our lives difficult and pushing people around."

The tall huntress shook her head.

"What's with the people foaming at their mouths to greet me? What's that really about?"

The young man looked down in embarrassment and cleared his throat.

"Uh, that... well, you see, the more the Castle proclaimed that you have to answer for the murder of those Guards, the more people in the settlement became, how do I say this... appreciative of you?"

Effie looked at him with a perplexed expression.

"Because I am beingly unjustly accused?"

He smiled sheepishly.

"Ah, no. Actually, the opposite. They really appreciate the fact that you had... allegedly... killed half a dozen Guards. In fact, their only regret is that you didn't kill more. There are tales about how exactly you dealt with them, too, one more colorful than the other. The most popular one is that, uh... the Guards wanted to rob you of your, eh, honor, so that's why you had to teach the Castle folks a lesson."

The tall huntress blinked.

"My... honor? Since when do I have honor?"

The young man grinned.

"Hey, don't look at me. I did not come up with this one, alright? Blame Park, it was his idea."

Effie looked darkly at another hunter, who just shrugged.

"Lady Nephis told us to do our best to make people in the settlement root for you. It worked, did it not?"

The unruly huntress rubbed her face with an exasperated expression.

"But... I didn't kill them, though?"

The hunter looked at her with no humor in his eyes.

"Who cares?"

Effie opened her mouth to say something, but Nephis interrupted her:

"Time is short. Don't waste it on useless chatter."

Then, she turned to the hunter with scars on his face and asked:

"What about my last instruction?"

He frowned, then took out a small wooden box from a leather pouch tied to his belt. The young man held the little box like it was the most terrible Nightmare Creature. Handling it with extreme caution, he approached Nephis and handed it to her.

There were drops of sweat on his forehead.

"This... is what the person from the castle brought. I don't know what they used to make Hide create that thing, but the result was exactly as you wished, at least according to the note they left."

He hesitated.

"The box and the note simply appeared on my pillow one day. I almost died of a heart attack when I read what that thing is supposed to be."

Sunny stared at the box with interest. Hide was one of Gunlaug's lieutenants, a young woman in charge of the Artisans. Her Aspect Ability allowed her to manipulate certain qualities of plants, which was of tremendous use here on the Forgotten Shore, where the food was scarce and monotonous.

But what could Nephis want from her that was so important? And why was the hunter so scared of the little box?

Carefully taking it, Changing Star looked at the box for a few moments, and then handed it to Caster.

"You know what to do."

With a short nod, Caster walked toward the door and disappeared.

Nephis, meanwhile, turned to the hunters and said in a steady tone:

"You did well. Thank you, all."

As wide smiles appeared on their faces, she took Effie's bottomless bag and opened it once again. Turning the bag upside down, Changing Star said:

"This is... not a reward, nor is it a gift. This is just something that all of you deserve, and going to need very soon."

A moment later, a river of glimmering crystals flowed from the bag, scattering on the table's surface. There were hundreds and hundreds of them, each shining with subtle, alluring light. Soon, the crystal spilled over the edges of the table and fell to the floor.

A few moments later, more than a thousand soul shards appeared before the stunned people who were gathered in the room. The bottomless bag finally ran empty.

Sunny stared at the tall pile of shining crystals and sighed. Back before all of this had started, he had a pile like that of his own... only much, much smaller. His pride and joy.

It was all gone now, sadly.

'What a sight. And I thought I was rich...'

Chapter 289: Start of the Play

Back in the Labyrinth, Sunny wasn't the only one who had killed countless Nightmare Creatures. In fact, due to his primary role as a scout, the three main fighters of the cohort had killed many more.

He knew for a fact that at least two of them — Effie and Caster — had fully saturated their soul cores long before their return journey was finished. Absorbing any more shards would have been useless for them. At some point, Nephis had begun to abstain from consuming her share of the spoils, too.

Added with the shards that Sunny traded for the unwanted Memories that the members of the cohort had accumulated, a truly incredible amount of the alluring crystals had been placed into Effie's leather bag.

He had often wondered what Nephis would use them for, and now, he had his answer.

The people gathered in the main hall of the hunting lodge — her most trusted subordinates — stared at the tall pile of soul shards in utter shock. Here in the Dark City, this was an inconceivable wealth. One shard was enough to buy a person a week of food, comfort, and safety behind the tall walls of the Bright Castle.

Too many had died because they lacked these things. So, in a sense, the mountain of crystals in front of them was tantamount to a thousand human lives.

The scarred hunter slowly tore his eyes away from the glittering shards and looked at Changing Star, his face pale and his voice suddenly raspy:

"What... what is this, Lady Nephis?"

She remained silent for a few moments, and then said in her even, reserved, strangely affecting voice:

"This is for you. To nourish yourselves, and grow stronger. You are going to need every bit of strength for what awaits us in the days to come."

The young man watched her, a dangerous flame slowly igniting in his eyes. A flame of resolve, adoration...

Almost worship.

Hidden in a shadowy corner, Sunny smiled with dark apprehension.

Back at the start of it all, he had told Nephis that Gunlaug could not be defeated because he controlled every facet of life here in the Dark City: food, safety, hope and fear... even power itself.

Then, he had watched as she gave the people of the outer settlement free food, placed them under the protection of her sword, and ignited the embers of the long-forgotten hope in their hearts. All that remained was power.

And now, she had brought them power as well.

No wonder they were ready to worship her. In their eyes, Changing Star was a noble savior.

...No one knew that their messiah was a counterfeit one.

Glancing at the stunned people, Effie sighed and took her bag from Neph's hands. Looking inside the empty Memory with a bit of a sad expression, she said:

"What are you waiting for? Gunlaug's men are probably already arming themselves to come here and break your thick skulls. Share the shards among yourselves and absorb them, dimwits!"

The Sleepers did not make her say it twice.

Not long after the last shard had been absorbed, one of the watchers ran into the room, breathing heavily

"Coming! They are coming!"

There was a hint of unrestrained fear in her voice.

Sunny flexed his shoulders and stretched.

'The show is about to start.'

The people gathered in the room glanced at each other, their faces full of tension. Only Nephis remained indifferent, watching out of the window at the dead city that sprawled below her like a desolate, lonesome graveyard.

"Stay calm, everyone."

Her voice settled them down. The hunter with scars on his face turned to Changing Star, a deep frown on his face. After hesitating for a few moments, he said:

"But... but... they are coming to take Effie! We can't allow that to happen. I'm done watching good people be taken into the damn Castle and never return. If they want to make an example out of her, like they did with Jubei... over my dead body!"

The hum of angry voices rose in the hall, accompanied by heated glares.

"Exactly!"

"They will pay for Jubei's death!"

"Your dead body? Why not their dead bodies?!"

Nephis lingered for a moment, then turned to them. A slight smile appeared on her face.

"...Don't worry. Nothing is going to happen to Effie. You have my word."

That seemed to calm them down a little. It seemed as though they were willing to believe anything she said, regardless of how impossible her promises were. Was that the definition of blind faith?

Before anyone could answer, however, a crashing sound came from the direction of the entrance to the stone lodge. It seemed as though someone had just smashed through the door.

There was a short scream, which quickly grew silent. Something fell on the floor.

Then, the sound of heavy footsteps could be heard, drawing closer to the hall where all the people had gathered. A few moments later, its door was shattered, too, exploding into a shower of splinters along with the bits of stone that surrounded it.

A giant of a man walked into the hall, his mere presence making the entire space look tiny. Compared to him, even Effie seemed to be of average height. There was a morose expression on his face and a dark glint in his cold, cruel eyes.

The giant did not wear any armor, allowing his monumental muscles to strain the fabric of a sleeveless silk shirt.

It appeared that Tessai, the fearsome leader of the Castle Guard, had decided to welcome the cohort back to the Dark City himself. Neph's followers paled, their fiery indignation replaced by fear.

'What a monster,' Sunny thought indifferently, pondering on what the quickest way to kill the morose giant would be.

Behind Tessai, a group of Guards, each wearing a sturdy armor and wielding Memory weapons, could be seen. Their eyes were immediately drawn to the robust figure of the tall huntress, and then, hateful smiles appeared on their faces. The Guards seemed very happy to finally find the woman accused of murdering their own.

The giant only glanced at Effie and then turned to Nephis. His deep, low voice resounded in the stone hall, sending shivers running through the hearts of many Sleepers gathered there.

"Changing Star. So you're alive after all."

She met his gaze and endured it without flinching.

"You must be Tessai. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

The giant lingered before answering. The corner of his mouth twitched and slowly curled upward. Finally, he said:

"Oh, no. The pleasure is all mine."

Then, he raised his mighty arm and pointed at Effie.

"Lord Gunlaug has invited this one to the Castle, to face punishment for her crimes. You should have trained your dogs better, Changing Star. See what happens when they go around biting people?"

He lowered his hand and flexed his shoulders, then looked at her with a dark expression.

"Now. I would advise you rats to step aside and let me take that she-wolf with me."

Nephis crossed her arms and stared at the giant, cold sparks igniting in the depths of her calm grey eyes. A few moments later, she said evenly:

"...Or what?"

Chapter 290: Judgement Day | Shadow Slave

Changing Star's words brought the room to dead silence. On both sides of it, people were slowly preparing themselves, dark resentment burning in their eyes. It felt as though the tension reached critical mass and was about to explode into a storm of violence.

Only three people remained calm and unaffected by the direness of the situation: Nephis herself, Sunny... and Tessai.

The giant bared his canines in a grin. His eyes, however, remained cold as ice.

"What a... revelation. And here I was, thinking that you are a great defender of justice. Were you not, Changing Star? Or is your sense of justice reserved only for the crimes of those who don't serve you?"

He sighed and added, his voice full of disappointment:

"That huntress of yours is accused of murder. Why are you trying to prevent me from bringing her to justice? I thought that you, of all people, would not get in the way of fairness."

Nephis frowned.

"Accused does not mean convicted. Why do you claim that she is guilty?"

Tessai stared at her and said, his low voice sending tremors through the stone hall:

"There is plenty of evidence. There are plenty of witnesses. So many people came forward to give a testimony! Her guilt is undeniable. How will you answer that, Changing Star?"

Sunny smiled slightly.

'How peculiar. So many people apparently saw Effie slaughter those fools. Did I imagine killing them or what? I was a bit crazy at the time, to be fair. Ha.'

Before Nephis could answer, Kai suddenly took a step forward and shouted:

"That is impossible! I..."

However, she made him stop with a stern look. The charming young man hesitated, then gritted his teeth and fell silent, glaring at Tessai with burning indignation.

Changing Star turned to the imposing giant and smiled.

"...Well, well. That changes everything, then. Please forgive me, if you can. I have been away from the Dark City for so long, and wasn't informed of these... developments. If this is the case, then by all means, take her away."

Effie grimaced and looked at her with an amused expression. Sunny did not take his eyes off of Tessai, however, his shadow stared at Nephis, too.

The smile suddenly disappeared from her face, replaced by boundless coldness.

"...However, I am coming with her. All of us are, in fact. We are awfully curious to see that evidence and hear those witnesses. And, most of all, we are all dying to see justice done and those guilty punished. Surely, Lord Gunlaug would not mind."

An expression of dissatisfaction appeared on Tessai's face. With a deep frown, he looked down on Neph from his oppressive height and said in a growling voice:

"Why do you think that you can come, wench?"

Changing Star was silent for a few moments, calmly looking at him. Then, her eyes suddenly shone with furious white light. In a voice that promised agony and death, she said with contempt:

"...Who's going to stop me?"

The giant stared at her with a complicated expression. It seemed as though he was being torn between pride... and fear.

It was all a mask, though. A masterful performance to hide his true emotions...

Triumph and jubilation.

He had come here with the excuse of bringing Effie to justice, but his true goal had always been Nephis. She was the one Gunlaug wanted to destroy. And now, she was bringing herself to him, like a lamb going to slaughter.

What Tessai did not know was that Changing Star was as far from a lamb as one could be.

'...More like a demon in sheep's clothing.'

Sunny glanced at the morose giant with something that resembled pity. Meanwhile, Tessai slowly shook his head and said, his voice full of false reluctance:

"...Fine. Do as you wish. Come with me to the Castle, if you want. Bring your rats with you. All of you will witness the brilliance of our Lord!"

All together, they exited the lodge. Tessai was walking in the front, holding the tall huntress by the shoulder. Her hands were tied behind her back with a flimsy rope — more of a symbolic gesture than a real restraint, considering Effie's strength. Nephis was keeping close, her face calm and indifferent.

The Guards and the members of Changing Star's faction were right behind them, throwing menacing looks at each other. Their faces were grim and full of resentful indignation. Sunny had hidden himself in the crowd, not wishing to draw any attention. Now, he was moving with it, feeling the

restless agitation through the chaotic movement of the surrounding shadows.

As they moved toward the Castle, more and more slum dwellers surrounded them, their faces full of shock and anger.

"They got Effie!"

"Bastards! Let her go!"

"Lady Nephis! Do something!"

Glancing at the growing number of people who were gathering around them, she smiled reassuringly and said:

"Stay calm! Come with us if you want. Today, we'll see justice done!"

However, her appeal to remain calm had the opposite effect on the crowd. It ignited it instead, and soon, a clamor of shouts rose above the outer settlement:

"Justice! Justice!"

...However, at some point, the tone of it changed, an almost palpable sense of bloodlust finding its way into the people's voices. The word they were shouting was also replaced, and soon, the crowd was chanting something else. Calling not for justice, but for...

Judgment.

"Judgement! Judgment!"

Sunny observed the raging beast of the human crowd with a troubled frown. A cold, familiar emotion grasped his heart. He knew this sickening feeling all too well.

It was the same way he felt when facing frenzied Nightmare Creatures.

'Hell...'

As they drew close to the stairs leading to the entrance of the castle, almost a hundred people were following them. The Guards standing at the gates stared at the crowd with a bit of fear in their eyes.

...And at some point, Caster appeared out of nowhere and took position right behind Nephis. The proud Legacy looked pale and a bit disheveled, but it seemed that he had managed to complete the mysterious task given to him by Changing Star without receiving any wounds.

A few moments later, they entered the Bright Castle.

Chapter 291: Eye of the Storm

The crowd poured into the castle, their faces contorted with anger and resentment. However, as soon as the slum dwellers passed beneath the swaying skulls that hung above the gates, their fury turned cold.

In the echoing stone halls of the Bright Castle, it was hard to forget that Gunlaug's power was absolute. For as long as any of them remembered, he had ruled over the Dark City with an iron fist, elevating those who bowed to him and destroying those who did not.

Countless men and women had tried to challenge the Bright Lord in the past... great people, terrible people, and everyone in-between. It was their skulls that now stared at the crowd, darkness nesting in their eyes.

Finally, doubt and fear appeared in the hearts of the inhabitants of the outer settlement. Many of them stared at Nephis, their faces turning dim and listless.

Changing Star did not react to this sudden change in one way or another. Looking straight ahead, she calmly walked forward, an indifferent expression on her face. Her usual mask was in its place once again, preventing anyone from knowing her true thoughts.

Trying to remain unnoticed, Sunny made his way to the front of the crowd to be closer to Nephis, Effie, and Caster. No one paid him any attention. In the grand scheme of things, people thought of him as an insignificant piece, if at all.

Just like he wanted them to.

From his point of view, the atmosphere in the Bright Castle seemed to be a bit strange, and not because of the invading horde of slum dwellers. Its halls and corridors were too empty, too lifeless. He didn't see any people hurrying on their daily business, as they always would. Even the opulent

desk in the entrance hall was empty, the clerk usually present behind it absent for some reason.

'Where is everyone?'

His question was soon answered.

Entering the throne room, he saw hundreds of Sleepers standing along its walls, waiting to meet them. It seemed as though the whole population of the Bright Castle had gathered here. There were the Guards, the Hunters, the Artisans, the quiet Handmaidens. Even people who paid tribute to remain in the Castle were all there.

Sunny noticed a few familiar faces. Stev, the large man in charge of the Memory Market, stood uncomfortably near the members of the Host. There was also Aiko, the owner of the gambling den, and many others whom he remembered from his brief stay in the Castle.

The air was tense and heavy. It seemed that not all of these people had come to the throne room of their own free will. Many of them had troubled, frightened expressions on their faces. Others were relaxed and joyful, waiting for an entertaining show with dark fascination burning in their eyes.

What disturbed him the most were the several figures of Nightmare Creatures standing among the humans. Those were the Echoes belonging to the inhabitants of the Castle, each one more terrifying than the other.

'...Why are they out of their owners' Soul Seas?'

On the raised dais at the far end of the great hall, illuminated by the false stars that were carved into the wall of the dark alcove, the four lieutenants of the Bright Lord stood. There was Gemma, the leader of the Hunters, Kido, the chief Artisan, and Seishan, who was in charge of the Handmaidens.

...and Harus, of course.

Sunny stared at the dreadful hunchback, who just stood there with his usual bored expression, looking at the wall.

He was pretty sure that today, at least one of them was going to die.

As if feeling his gaze, Harus suddenly turned and glanced at Sunny. This time, however, Sunny did not look away. He stared straight into the hunchback's glassy eyes, a calm and calculating expression on his face.

'I wonder how he killed all those people without being seen even once. With so many victims, somebody had to catch a glimpse of this butcher hard at work. What Aspect Ability does he possess? How do I counter it?'

Harus stared at him for a few moments, then tilted his head and smiled with strange amusement. A second later, he turned away and looked at the wall again, seemingly losing all interest.

Meanwhile, Tessai walked to the middle of the hall and threw Effie down, forcing her to kneel on the floor. Then, he gave Nephis a dark look and joined the other lieutenants on the steps leading to the throne.

The two hundred or so slum dwellers were standing at one end of the throne room, their faces grim and full of dark apprehension. With the exception of those directly serving Changing Star, most of them were dressed in dirty rags, with only a few wearing a proper armor. Some were unarmed, some had Memories or makeshift weapons hanging on their belts, and some even had swords hastily fashioned out of the talons of the slain Spire Messenger.

Opposite them, with their back to the throne, stood the people of the castle. Many of them looked like they didn't want to be here, but more had contempt and indignation in their eyes. Those were mostly the members of the Host, who were more than two hundred people strong. Each of them was clad in a sturdy Memory armor and wielded enchanted weapons. They were strong, well-fed, and experienced in combat.

The hunters, especially, were a formidable presence despite their comparatively small number. They were looking at Nephis with intense

hatred, the memory of her killing one of their own in this very hall still fresh in their minds.

Changing Star stood beside Effie in the middle of the empty space between the two groups, looking at the white throne. Her ivory face was cold and indifferent, and her silver hair glinted in the rays of sunshine that fell through tall windows. Sparks of light were dancing in the depths of her calm grey eyes.

She was the focal point of everyone's attention and the target of the dark storm of emotions that raged between the ancient walls of the Castle today.

If it bothered her, she did not show it.

And then, finally, the Bright Lord himself appeared.

Sunny knew that Gunalug entered the great hall even before seeing him. He knew it because of the sudden change in the people that surrounded him. It was as though a wave of invisible pressure had crashed into the crowd, forcing them to groan and bend, almost buckling to the ground. Their legs trembled, their faces paled, and drops of sweat appeared on their skin, as well as fear and panic in their eyes.

The mastermind behind this ghoulisn spectacle had finally arrived.

Chapter 292: Just Cause | Shadow Slave

Gunlaug looked just like the last time Sunny had seen him.

...Like a golden demon born of some harrowing hell.

The Bright Lord was tall and had broad, powerful shoulders. His body was clad in a strange armor that seemed to be made out of molten gold. It was both solid and liquid, flowing over his mightly muscles and covering him from head to toe.

Not even Gunlaug's eyes were exposed.

In the place where his face should have been, there was nothing but a smooth and empty expanse of polished gold. The great hall of the Bright Castle reflected in it, and all the people gathered there did, too.

As soon as Sunny saw the golden mask, he felt the oppressive aura that radiated from the Bright Lord. Even knowing what was going to happen, he couldn't help but shake a little and bite his lip.

The mind assault of the golden armor was truly hard to endure. Even with the protection of the Puppeteer's Shroud, he felt it pressing on him, making it hard to breathe. Deep inside, a primal, bestial fear was clawing at his heart.

But this fear did not belong to him. It was fake. With a dark grimace, Sunny strangled it and made it disappear.

Walking out of the darkness of the alcove like a golden apparition, Gunlaug glanced at the mass of people below him and sat on the throne. His pose was relaxed and casual, as though he was here to leisurely resolve a trivial matter, not decide someone's fate.

Hundreds of fates, perhaps.

However, despite his laid-back attitude, everyone gathered in the great hall swayed a little, pressed down to the ground by the incredible force of his presence.

The Bright Lord lingered for a few moments, and then said, his serpentine voice full of mirth:

"Ah, what a sight. All my precious wards gathered here, united in the desire to see justice prevail. This dedication, this fervor for the rule of law... oh, it just makes my blood boil with appreciation. Don't you think it's wonderful?"

He laughed and turned his head slightly, peering directly at Nephis. She lowered her head a bit, an almost imperceptible tremor running through her body. To Sunny, though, it seemed as though the plates of marble beneath her feet were about to crack from the terrifying pressure of Gunlaug's gaze.

Nevertheless, she endured it without showing much of the tremendous strain she was under.

The Bright Lord paused and then echoed his words, a note of some dark emotion finding its way into his voice:

"Don't you think it's wonderful, Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan?"

Nephis greeted her teeth, struggling to remain steady under the psychic onslaught of the golden armor. When she finally answered, her voice sounded suppressed:

"...Indeed."

Gunlaug remained silent for a bit. Although his face was hidden behind the golden mask, Sunny had a feeling that he was smiling.

Finally, he spoke:

"How nice. Somehow, I was under the impression that you would disagree. I've been told by my most loyal aids that you are a disagreeable person. I

guess you just can't trust anyone these days."

With that, he glanced at his lieutenants, making them pale and shiver.

Sunny shivered, too. The message hidden in those words was clear: Gunlaug was letting Nephis know that he had known that she had a spy among the highest ranks of his people all along.

And didn't care. Maybe even silently allowed it to happen.

'Damnation...'

How much did he know?

Finally, the Bright Lord looked at Effie. After a few seconds had passed in tense silence, he spoke to her with a hint of sadness:

"We meet again, Effie. What a shame that it is in these tragic circumstances. If only you had listened to me and joined the Host... perhaps then you might not have fallen so low. Such pity..."

He shook his head and sighed.

"I had high hopes for you. But, alas... murdering innocent humans is not something that can be forgiven. Look at yourself! Instead of a noble Hunter, you have turned into a wild beast. But that is what happens when people refuse my grace. They become no better than Nightmare Creatures."

His somber words echoed in the silence of the great hall, making people lower their gazes.

Effie trembled, pressed down by the force of his undivided attention. But then, she grinned and answered, her raspy voice sounding relaxed and carefree.

She only said two words:

"Fuck off."

Gunlaug laughed and raised his hands in a helpless gesture.

"I rest my case. You all see how unrepentant this vile murderer is. There's not a drop of remorse left in her corrupted, rotten soul. That is why, with a heavy heart, I have to sentence this once-promising young woman to death. She has to answer for her crimes, and leaving her alive would put you, my wards, in danger. I am left with no choice."

A hum of voices rose from the crowd. Slum dweller or an inhabitant of the Castle, everyone was affected by his last words:

"Don't you dare, bastard!"

"Kill that murderer!"

"Effie! We're here!"

"Make her pay!"

"Lady Nephis! You can't let them!"

"Kill her!"

"Kill all of them!"

Unaffected by this outburst of boiling emotions, Nephis put a hand on Effie's shoulder and looked at the Bright Lord with a cold expression. Staring directly at the golden mask, she frowned and said, her voice clear and loud:

"I object."

The storm of voices suddenly grew quiet. Everyone turned to her, two kinds of expectation hiding in their eyes.

One was full of hope. The other full of vicious glee.

Gunlaug tilted his head.

"Object? What do you mean? Her guilt has been proven without any room left for doubt. There is nothing you can do to change the outcome."

He paused for a moment and then suddenly leaned forward, his insidious voice washing over the great hall like a wave:

"Well. Unless, of course..."

Changing Star looked at him with dark resolve and lowered her chin stubbornly.

Then, she said:

"I want to invoke the right of challenge."

Chapter 293: The Challenge | Shadow Slave

An echoing silence fell on the great hall of the ancient castle. The fateful words had been spoken, and now there was no turning back.

For better or for worse.

Gunlaug tilted his head and stayed quiet for a few moments. Then, the sound of his laughter rolled over the crowd.

"The right of challenge? Oh, that old thing. You are awfully fond of that tradition, it seems. Not even a full year since you have arrived under my roof, and I had the pleasure of hearing you say those words twice. Insolent girl..."

He paused for a few moments and then leaned forward. His voice suddenly turned cold, full of dark undertones.

"To be honest, I am very tired of your insolence, Changing Star."

Before Nephis could answer, the Bright Lord suddenly rose from his throne, towering above the crowd like a statue cast from pure gold. Then, he took a leisurely step forward and began descending the stairs of the dais. With each step, the sound of his serpentine voice resounded, growing lower and lower, until it turned into a fiendish, wrathful growl.

"Your little games were fun at first, but the more I observed your clumsy attempts at playing the hero, the more disgusted I became. I couldn't believe how naive, self-righteous, and stupid you turned out to be. It made me sick. It made me want to do things that I promised myself to never do again. Ah, I expected better from the daughter of the Immortal Flame! To disappoint me so thoroughly..."

His growl reverberated through the great hall and then abruptly disappeared. A moment later, Gunlaug suddenly threw his head back and laughed brightly.

"Oh, but then it hit me! I was such a fool. You fooled me so beautifully! Brilliantly done, Changing Star. Please, do accept my compliment! After I saw the real you, ah, it was such a joy to watch your performances."

He left the stairs and stepped on the marble floor of the throne room. The crowd of the Castle inhabitants parted in front of him, people hurrying to get as far away from the oppressive aura of the golden armor as they could.

The Bright Lord sighed.

"It's such a shame that all of this will have to stop now. You see... while I can't help but applaud your effort, in the end, you still turned out to be just another fool."

He glanced at Effie and asked, his voice full of mockery:

"A challenge? I don't think it's your place to demand such a thing. You are not the one accused of the crime, after all. If someone has to invoke the right of challenge, it should be Effie herself. Don't you think?"

Nephis gritted her teeth, struggling to remain poised under the assault of the psychic pressure. Refusing to turn away from the polished mirror of the Bright Lord's face, she said:

"...It's just like one of your minions said. I am responsible for the actions of my people. Any crime they commit... is my crime."

Gunlaug watched her, his expression hidden. Neph's pale face was reflected in his mask, staring back at her with merciless grey eyes. After a while, he spoke:

"Sound logic. Who are you going to challenge, then?"

She hesitated for a few moments, then said steadily:

"Whoever it was that passed the guilty verdict."

The Bright Lord chuckled.

"Oh? But by the same logic... that would be me."

She smiled darkly and glared at him, white flames dancing in her eyes.

"Then you are the one I challenge!"

Her words resounded in the great hall, sending hundreds of people gathered there into a state of stunned shock.

'So, this is it.'

Sunny looked at the crowd of stunned people, mentally separating them into two groups. Those who were going to be a threat and those who were not.

Regardless of how the fight between Nephis and Gunlaug ended, the small enclave of humans living in the Dark City was going to descend into utter chaos. If Changing Star was killed, her followers would make her into a martyr and go insane. The Host would not just let them off, either. If the Bright Lord fell...

No matter how much of a bastard Gunlaug was, he was also the glue that held this whole place together. Without a tyrant enforcing some semblance of order, no matter how ghoulish, things would get really ugly really fast. Who was going to stop the Nightmare Creatures from wiping the humans out then?

In any case, there was going to be a bloodbath.

But he was done worrying about these matters. In the upcoming mayhem, Sunny's goals were very simple.

Remain alive. Protect Nephis. Make sure that she becomes the new tyrant of the Dark City.

...So that she could carve the way back to reality for a few lucky survivors. If she doesn't die right here and now, of course.

In the silence that enveloped the great hall, the Bright Lord laughed and tilted his head, staring at Changing Star from behind his golden mask. Then, he said:

"How audacious! I wonder what gives you the confidence to dare challenge me. Various people have tried to kill me, you know. I have a little hobby, actually — collecting their skulls. Come to think of it, your pretty head would look really well in my collection."

Suddenly, he raised a hand and gestured to his forehead:

"Don't tell me... don't tell me that it's all because of that little toy that you took off the First Lord's corpse? Oh, no! That would be terrible. You didn't really think that one powerful Memory would be enough to defeat me?"

Nephis lingered for a while, glaring at Gunlaug. Then, she said evenly:

"My bare hands would be enough to defeat a worm like you. The Memory is just to make it quicker."

Gunlaug stared at her for a moment, and then chuckled.

"Great! This is great! Such spirit! I will really enjoy breaking you, Changing Star. When this done."

He flexed his shoulders and said, his voice sending shivers into the hearts of hundreds of people gathered in the hall:

"Alright. I accept your challenge."

Chapter 294: Song of Steel

The great hall of the Bright Castle grew silent and still. However, that stillness was not tranquil, but like a predator that fell low to the ground, ready to explode into a violent lunge to tear its prey apart.

The Sleepers pressed themselves against the walls, giving Changing Star and the Bright Lord space for their battle. Effie was dragged away from the middle of the hall by two Guards, and now, there was nothing but emptiness separating the two fighters.

From one side of the hall, the five lieutenants — Gemma, Tessai, Kido, Seishan, and Harus — were looking at their master with complicated emotions. On the other side of it, Kai, Caster, and the leaders of the outer settlement hunting parties were doing the same. Cassie was also there, her hand resting on the hilt of the Quiet Dancer. There was a grim, somber expression on her beautiful face.

Sunny glanced at the blind girl, and then turned to the center of the throne room.

Two people were standing opposite each other there. One was a tall man encased in a strange golden carapace that followed the lines of his mighty body. The other was a young woman in an elegant plate armor forged of white metal.

There was a subtle similarity between them. Both were emanating a striking, compelling sense of power and confidence that very few people ever possessed. Both were fearsome and deadly. Both were at the apex of their kind.

However, this was where the similarity ended.

'This... doesn't not look good,' Sunny thought, evaluating the two fighters.

He knew better than anyone what Nephis was capable of, but even then, the sight of her facing Gunlaug made a deep scowl appear on her face.

The Bright Lord was much taller than her and weighed probably twice as much as Changing Star. He was stronger, had longer reach, and much more experience in slaughtering people.

That was not even considering that damned golden armor of his.

Even with the miraculous augmentation of the Dawn Shard, Neph's silver sword could barely be considered at the same power level as an Ascended weapon would have been. That was still a whole rank below Gunlaug's strange Echo.

Trying to break through that armor was going to be as hard as cracking the shell of a carapace centurion with a sword forged from mundane steel. Incredibly hard, if not impossible. And unlike the carapace of a scavenger, the golden Echo did not seem to have a weak spot.

At that moment, sparks of light appeared in the air in front of Changing Star. The silver longsword appeared in her hand, and she pointed it to the ground... for now.

'What weapon is that bastard going to use?'

That would decide a lot. Sunny was sure that Gunlaug possessed an arsenal of powerful Memory weapons... but how powerful were they exactly?

He glanced at the Bright Lord, expecting to see the same sparks swirling around his hands. However, there was none.

Instead, the liquid gold flowed forward and assumed the shape of a heavy battle axe, which Gunlaug then grasped and leisurely put on his shoulder. The polished mirror of his mask reflected the slight frown that appeared on Neph's face.

'Dammit.'

The weapon the Bright Lord was going to use was also a part of his Echo, and as such, possessed the quality of a Transcended weapon. It was going to cut through the Starlight Legion Armor without much effort.

'This is even worse than I imagined...'

As Sunny gritted his teeth, Gunlaug said in a serpentine, insidious voice:

"Any last words, Changing Star?"

Nephis tilted her head a little and remained silent for a while. Her helmet weaved itself from strings of light, hiding her face completely, with only calm grey eyes visible through the crack of the visor. Finally, she answered with only one word, her usually even voice full of furious contempt:

"...Traitor."

A wave of whispers spread through the crowd. People were guessing what exactly she meant by that, but Sunny suspected that he was the only one who knew.

Neph wasn't accusing Gunlaug of betraying his fellow humans or causing the deaths of numerous young men and women. She was accusing him of betraying the true duty of the Awakened and submitting to the Nightmare Spell instead of fighting it to the bitter end.

In her mind, that was a far greater crime.

The only crime, even.

The Bright Lord laughed.

"That's too bad. I heard that one before..."

And then, without wasting even a fraction of a second, he suddenly exploded forward in a terrifying, lightning-fast lunge. Freewebnovel.com

The shift between peace and violence was so instant and swift that most people gathered in the great hall did not even realize what was happening until a few moments later.

With each of Gunlaug's strides, the floor of the throne room shook a little. He flew at Nephis like a furious giant made of gold, swinging his battle axe

with both incredible agility and horrible force.

She barely reacted in time, shifting her body and raising the sword to deflect the killing blow to the side. However, then something unexpected happened.

The shaft of the battle axe suddenly elongated, the liquid gold comprising it flowing forward to assume a new shape. As a result, her deflection ended up being almost useless.

With an awkward stagger, Changing Star reeled back. The very edge of the battle axe's blade bit into the helmet of the Starlight Legion Armor and effortlessly cleaved through it, leaving a shallow cut on her cheek. In the next moment, Gunlaug's foot crashed into her ribs, sending the young woman flying through the air.

Nephis landed in a roll and used one hand to stop herself from sliding on the marble floor. As drops of blood fell from beneath her helmet, merciless white flames ignited in her eyes.

A moment later, she jumped forward and met the onslaught of the Bright Lord with an equal amount of fury.

The deadly song of clashing steel resounded in the ancient hall...

Like a promise of much greater bloodshed yet to come.

Chapter 295: The Duel | Shadow Slave

The breastplate of Neph's armor cracked from the force of Gunlaug's blow and there was blood streaming from beneath her helmet, but that didn't slow Changing Star one bit.

Jumping forward to meet the Bright Lord's assault, she dodged the blade of the battle axe, twisted, and tried to deliver a strike of her own. A furious clangor of metal exploded in the silence of the great hall, both fighters moving with incredible speed, precision, and skill.

In a span of several seconds, they exchanged numerous blows, but each was either deflected, dodged, or blocked. This terrifying clash was not at all like Sunny had imagined. There was nothing elegant, graceful, or elevated about it — all there was was barbarous violence and cruel brutality, each of the fighters doing everything in their power to break, cripple and kill their opponent.

Their voices sounded like that of wild beasts, partially from the incredible strain of the duel, but also to let out the suffocating bloodlust and murderous intent that were drowning their minds.

That was not to say that any one of them had lost control of their thoughts and actions. Both were cold-blooded killers and knew how to remain calm in the throes of the most terrible rage.

A few seconds later, Gunlaug and Nephis disengaged and staggered away from each other, letting the spectators draw in shaky breaths.

The Bright Lord's golden armor was pristine and unscathed. Nephis, however, had several bloody cuts on her body, the black material encompassing it torn and ripped. Another crack appeared on one of her pauldrons. She glanced at it briefly and then indifferently turned back to watch her enemy.

Everyone in the throne room, in one way or another, was thinking about the same thing, a cold and sickening feeling slowly spreading through their chests. How would they fare in such a fight themselves? The answer was simple — they would have been long dead, eviscerated in mere seconds by one of these awesome fighters.

Everyone felt death breathing down their necks.

Among all the people watching their fight, however, there were two who observed Changing Star's every move with a special kind of attention. They were Sunny and Caster.

Their reasons were studying how Nephis fought were entirely different, but also almost the same.

...Just a second of rest, and the two fighters lunged at each other once again. This time, however, their behavior was different.

The first clash was just a test to gauge what the enemy was capable of. Now, they were not holding anything back, throwing everything they had at the enemy.

At least that was how it seemed.

Changing Star's sword suddenly flashed with brilliant radiance. Removing one hand from the hilt, she grasped the incandescent blade with her armored gauntlet at the middle to better control its tip and raised it to shoulder level. With Gunlaug's ability to change the length of his weapon at will and almost impregnable armor, this grip was more advantageous.

The Bright Lord absorbed the battle axe back into his armor. Then, two straight blades grew out of his forearms, creating weapons that resembled long, heavy punching daggers.

They clashed once again, this time with even more fury. The people pressing themselves into the walls of the throne room trembled.

Nephis seemed to abandon a lot of her defense, willing to take much bigger risks to obliterate the enemy. The reach of her sword was much shorter now, but the silver blade also grew much more agile and unpredictable.

Gunlaug's daggers were a true menace to resist, however. They flew at her from all sides, either in tandem or in a staggered rhythm, making it hard for the young woman to predict and deflect each blow.

But she wasn't trying to.

Changing Star seemed willing to receive many shallow wounds to get a chance to land a strike on her opponent. More bloody lacerations appeared on her body, the Starlight Legion Armor barely holding together.

But she achieved her goal, in the end.

Catching one of Gunlaug's daggers between the blade of her sword and her body, she forcefully twisted the sword sideways and caused him to turn his torso. Then, Nephis sidestepped and suddenly appeared behind the Bright Lord, with a fraction of a second left before he could turn around and defend himself.

Her incandescent sword finished its arc high above her head, and, changing back to the standard grip, she brought it down with all her strength on Gunlaug's shoulder.

The radiant white blade flashed through the air and bit into the golden armor.

...And then, it slid fruitlessly off its bright surface, not leaving even a scratch on it.

'Damn it all!'

In the next moment, Gunlaug threw the sword to the side with one arm and delivered a terrifying blow with the other, his dagger aimed at Neph's face. She managed to turn her head at the last moment, avoiding instant death, but was still caught by the enemy's fist.

The impact was so strong that Changing Star was thrown backward several meters. The helmet had shattered completely, revealing a pale, bloodied face, with bits of metal piercing the skin. She rolled several times and came to a stop, then rose to her feet with some effort. The white flames dimmed a little, and there was a dark, disoriented emotion in her eyes.

The gem of the Dawn Shard shone gently right above them, illuminating Neph's wounded face.

A moment later, she dismissed what little remained of the helmet and stared at Gunlaug with resentment, blood running from the cuts on her cheeks.

The Bright Lord laughed and made a step toward Changing Star, his voice echoing under the roof of the great hall like a death sentence.

"What? That was all?"

Nephis did not answer. Instead, she placed both hands on the blade of her sword, holding it with its hilt and crossguard up, like a makeshift mace.

The radiance of the silver sword spread to encompass all of it.

But it didn't stop there.

Sunny opened his eyes wide.

'What?!'

The furious white flames spread from the sword to Changing Star's hands, her arms, and then devoured her figure completely.

But they weren't burning in the white, cracked metal of the Starlight Legion Armor.

Instead, the brilliant radiance was emanating from her skin.

Chapter 296: Creature of Light

Sunny stared at the shining figure in front of him, a myriad of thoughts appearing in his mind.

With her skin emanating blinding white radiance, Nephis looked beautiful and pure, as though untouched by the imperfections of the mundane world. Wreathed in light, she was like a heavenly angel that descended into the mortal realm.

The sight of it was both breathtaking and terrifying.

...It was also eerily similar to the image of the radiant creature he had seen on the walls of the ancient mine. Especially with the gem of the Dawn Shard burning on Neph's forehead like a third eye.

But that wasn't what gave Sunny pause.

'How is possible?!

But then, why wouldn't it be possible?

At the start of their journey, he had guessed that Changing Star's Aspect was of the Divine rank, just like his. Her powers seemed to be able to either augment Memories or heal, while his own could be used to scout, enhance Memories, or augment Sunny himself. Because Nephis had never used the white flames to achieve that last effect, he had assumed that she was incapable of doing so, and thus her Aspect, while powerful, was less versatile.

But augmenting herself was exactly what Neph was doing right now. Sunny knew it instantly — she wrapped her body in light just like he had wrapped his own body in the shadow countless times. With this enhancement, her physical prowess had to grow exponentially.

Had she always been capable of doing so and hid that facet of her Aspect intentionally, or was this something she learned how to do only after

growing more powerful and absorbing hundreds upon hundreds of soul shards in the Labyrinth?

That question was going to remain unanswered, at least for now. Because the battle between Changing Star and the Bright Lord was far from over.

Just like Sunny suspected, with her body wreathed in light, Nephis suddenly became much stronger and faster. If before she was visibly weaker and slower than Gunlaug, even if not by much, now, it seemed the other way around. She dashed toward the enemy, batted away one of the daggers, and delivered a crushing blow right to the polished mirror mask.

This time, there was a slight mark left on the surface of the golden armor by her sword.

The two of them became locked in a ferocious battle, dozens of attacks flying at each fighter. The clangor of metal grew in volume, turning into an almost deafening cacophony. Changing Star was fighting with abandon, more and more wounds accumulating on her radiant body. However, she also managed to land several more blows, each striking at the golden mirror of the Bright Lord's face.

Slowly, a hint of a crack started to appear on its surface.

Sunny also noticed that her wounds weren't healing. It seemed as if Nephis was only capable to support two effects at the same time — one augmenting her sword, the other her body. To summon the healing power of the white flame, she had to sacrifice one or the other.

But she was unwilling to.

A few moments later, it seemed as though Gunlaug was slowly starting to lose ground. His enemy was just too fast, powerful, and ferocious. More and more strikes landed on the golden armor, and although it seemed to hold, for now, it was clear that the continuous blows were taking a toll on both the Bright Lord and his Echo.

...However, the Golden Serpent had a few tricks up his sleeve, too.

When the momentum of the fight began to favor Nephis, he suddenly chuckled and turned his face to catch her reflection in the mirror mask.

A second later, the sound of muffled groans could be heard escaping from the mouths of hundreds of people. The psychic pressure emanated by the Bright Lord suddenly increased manyfold, throwing some people to the ground and making others stagger. Sunny saw blood flowing from people's noses, eyes, and mouths.

He himself also felt it and greeted his teeth, struggling to remain standing. He almost failed.

Changing Star, who was at the center and the true target of the mental assault, let out a pained yelp and staggered.

... That was the moment when Gunlaug stepped forward and stabbed her through the chest with one of his daggers.

As the long blade pierced the lithe body of the young woman and exited from her back, he said in a calm and friendly voice:

"There, there. That's enough. Go die now, stupid girl."

Then, he twisted the dagger, making her scream once again.

Nephis stared at him, blood flowing from her mouth. Then, she raised her sword and hit him in the face with the pommel, again and again, until a small crack finally appeared on the surface of the mirror mask.

But the crushing wave of mental pressure did not go away. Instead, it only increased.

Gunlaug laughed.

"Are you done? No? Well, let me help you then..."

His second daughter flashed through the air, slashing Nephis across the wrist. With the tendons cut, the silver sword fell from her hand, its radiance dimming.

Nephis used her other hand to push the Bright Lord away and slid off the blade of the dagger, then staggered away, eventually falling to her knees. The white radiance emanated from her body grew brighter, and the wound on her body began to heal. A low groan escaped from her lips.

Gunalug approached the kneeling young woman, laughing.

"Did you think I wouldn't know about that little trick of yours? Go ahead and heal. See where it gets you."

With that, he grabbed her by the neck and stabbed her again, reopening the terrible wound that had just closed once again.

"How's that? Come on, heal it again!"

With a ferocious growl, he continued stabbing her, over and over, his hand quickly becoming painted red with blood.

"Oh, this is really fun! But a bit tiring. How about I just cut off your pretty head right now and end this?"

Nephis spat some blood and turned her head to face him.

And then she... closed her eyes.

Back when they had first arrived in the Dark City, Sunny had noticed that Cassie wasn't affected by the psychic pressure of the golden armor at all. From that, he deduced that the source of the mental assault was not the armor itself, but the golden mirror of its face — or, to be exact, seeing your reflection in it. After returning from the Castle, he had shared that insight with Nephis.

It seemed that she remembered it.

With her eyes closed, Changing Star raised her hands and grabbed the Bright Lord that was strangling her by the shoulders. Then, she used her whole body to deliver a devastating blow to his face, the gem of the Crown of Dawn hitting Gunalog right where his nose should have been.

Finally, the surface of the golden mirror cracked and shattered. Through the small break, a blue eye full of murderous joy was revealed. Shocked by the sudden blow, Gunlaug staggered away.

"You bitch!"

The daggers were instantly absorbed into the golden armor, replaced by the heavy battle axe again.

...But he didn't get the chance to use it.

With her eyes still closed, Nephis swiftly turn to the sound of his voice. Then, she raised her hand, opened her fist... and blew on it.

In the next moment, a cloud of red sand shot from her palm and enveloped Gunlaug.

Sunny stared at it in shock, an expression of sudden recognition appearing on his face.

He knew the look at that cloud all too well. It wasn't sand.

It was the Blood Flower pollen.

Chapter 297: Red Flower | Shadow Slave

The red cloud enveloped Gunlaug, seeping through the crack in his helmet. A second too late to react, the Bright Lord reeled away... but not before inhaling the pollen of the nightmarish flower.

Sunny didn't know when and how Nephis had gotten it, but he knew that he wasn't mistaken — this was the pollen of the Blood Flower, the grisly parasitic blossom that he himself had the misfortune of inhaling once, a long time ago.

The memory of the bloodthirsty red flowers growing through his lungs sent shivers through Sunny's entire body. Back then, the only reason for why he had not become a host for the insidious Nightmare Creature was because of the Blood Weave. Without it, he would have been devoured from the inside in mere minutes.

...And now, the Bright Lord was going to fall to the same fate.

'She... she really did it...'

The rest of the Sleepers gathered in the great hall did not know that Gunlaug was already as good as dead, however. Including the tyrant himself.

Bending over in a fit of violent coughing, he growled:

"What? What have you done to me, bitch?!"

Nephis was still where he had dropped her, kneeling on the floor. Her armor was shattered and torn, with rivers of blood streaming down the cracked white metal. The brilliant radiance of her skin had been extinguished, but there were incandescent flames burning under it.

The horrible wounds on her chest were slowly closing, and the lacerations on her face were already gone, leaving it just as perfect as it had been

before. That face, however, was bloodied and pale, contorted in an expression of terrible agony.

In her eyes, however, there was dark malice.

A chorus of whispers rolled through the crowd when they witnessed the ghastly wounds healing themselves. Be it the members of the Host or the slum dwellers, all of them had two words on their lips:

"Immortal Flame!"

"Immortal Flame!"

And then someone shouted, their voice full of stunned awe:

"This... this is the blessing of the fire!"

Deaf to all of it, Changing Star moaned and slowly rose to her feet. Then, she struggled to look at the Bright Lord and said, her voice shaking from pain:

"I... I killed you."

Through the crack in the golden mask, Sunny saw Gunlaug's blue eye first narrow, and then suddenly open wide. In the next moment, the Bright Lord began coughing again.

This time, a suppressed scream escaped from his lips.

'...It's about to start.'

Sunny shifted a little, subtly positioning himself closer to Caster.

Gunlaug, meanwhile, staggered and groaned. There was blood dripping from beneath his broken mask.

Then, a shaky laugh resounded in the throne room of the ancient castle.

"Ah... did you really? What a... surprise..."

He dropped his battle axe, which then turned into a puddle of liquid gold and merged with the strange armor. He took a step toward Nephis, but then swayed and fell to one knee.

For a few moments, the Bright Lord remained motionless. Then, his body convulsed, more blood spilling through the cracks in the visor of his golden helmet. A muffled scream could be heard once again, full of torturous pain.

Hundreds of people were watching him, stunned, their eyes full of disbelief, anger, and terror.

The Bright Lord raised his head and glanced at Nephis, then hissed:

"What a... joke! I can't... can't die like this!"

Changing Star looked down on him, her face cold and motionless. There was no triumph or gloating in her eyes Freewebnovel.com.

But there was also no mercy.

Turning away, she hesitated for a moment and then said, her voice strangely gentle:

"...Rest easy now. Your nightmare is over."

Gunlaug stared at her in disbelief, and then suddenly laughed. There was a disturbing, gurgling sound coming from somewhere deep in his throat, as though he was drowning in blood.

"Good... this is too good. Yours is... only starting, though..."

With that, he slowly rose and then turned away. Swaying, the Bright Lord took one step forward, then another.

The crowd watched silently as he arduously made his way to the steps that led to the throne of white marble and climbed them, blood spilling from the cracks in his helmet, his golden armor flowing and swirling around his body in a state that resembled panic.

Finally, Gunlaug reached the dais and fell on his throne, looking down on the great hall of the ancient castle with a strange, wistful expression. Then, he strained to say something, but became twisted in a violent coughing fit instead.

In the end, he just whispered a few almost inaudible words and leaned on the back of the throne, his body relaxing. Sunny was perhaps the only one who had heard him, due to the fact that his shadow was hiding in the darkness of the alcove all along.

"I... tried. In the beginning... I really did..."

This was what Gunlaug had whispered.

And then, he grew still.

The Bright Lord of the Dark City was dead.

Sunny knew it instantly because of the fact that the terrible psychic aura pressing him to the ground suddenly disappeared, letting all the people around him move and breathe free.

Knowing what was about to come, he glanced at the far end of the great hall one last time.

A corpse in golden armor was sitting on the throne, a beautiful red blossom appearing from the crack in his polished mask.

A few moments later, the armor suddenly shined with white light and then disintegrated into countless sparks, revealing the man who had ruled this cursed place for many years with an iron fist.

Gunlaug was surprisingly handsome. Even though his face was covered in blood, it was easy to tell. He had a short beard and long blond hair. One of his eyes was gone, eaten through by the Blood Flower, and the other was quickly turning glassy.

What surprised Sunny the most, though, was how young he looked. It was hard to imagine the Bright Lord as anything but powerful and ageless, but

in fact, he was no older than twenty-seven. Somehow, Sunny had forgotten that fact.

'...Kids. All of us here are just lost kids.'

He didn't waste too much time thinking about that, though.

Because in the next few moment, Tessai, who had been staring at his dead lord with his usual morose expression, turned around and looked at the crowd of slum dwellers, then at the members of the Host.

The giant lingered for a second and then said, his deep, dark voice reverberating through the ancient hall:

"...What are you waiting for? Kill them all."

And then, everything descended into madness.

Chapter 298: Fire and Blood

The first Guard to follow Tessai's order lunged forward, summoning his weapon... and fell to the ground, a heavy kunai suddenly appearing in his eye.

Due to the everyone's attention being drawn to the bloodied figure on the throne, no one noticed as Sunny moved his hand slightly, letting the Prowling Thorn fly.

He wasn't looking at Gunlaug, though. His eyes were drawn to Nephis, while his shadow watched Caster.

When the Bright Lord died, something strange happened to Changing Star. Her eyes opened wide, losing focus, and then she swayed a little and fell to one knee.

Her body was busy rearranging itself after absorbing a huge amount of soul essence, which made Nephis vulnerable for a few moments.

That was when Tessai had given his order, and that was when Sunny threw his kunai and killed the Guard rushing to attack the slum dwellers.

Someone screamed, and in the next moment, the great hall of the Castle descended into chaos.

Unnoticed by anyone, Caster suddenly turned into a blur.

'Not so fast!'

Sunny was thrown off his feet and awkwardly fell, his wrist screaming in pain. He had achieved his goal, though: even while falling, he saw the proud Legacy rolling on the marble floor, tripped by the invisible string of the Prowling Thorn.

A second later, hundreds of Sleepers clashed against each other, their suppressed rage, bloodlust, and murderous resentment finally exploding

into a storm of violence.

The white marble was instantly painted red with blood.

The Guards slaughtered indiscriminately, their powerful Memory armaments and training giving them a vast advantage over the disorganized crowd of slum dwellers. But they weren't killing just those who came from the outer settlement: in the panic and havoc that engulfed the throne room, differentiating friend from foe was not an easy task.

Sunny saw several Artisan assistants fall to their blades, as well as a few unlucky people who had paid a heavy tribute in exchange for the promise of safety.

With Gunlaug gone, that safety was now gone, too.

It almost seemed as though the Guards didn't care who they killed, or were even glad to be let off the chain. Even if there were those among them who had preserved some vestiges of conscience, now, it was utterly gone, devoured by the crowd instinct and the exhilaration of being free from all restraints. Their faces were contorted with ferocious grimaces, and their eyes burned with rage, hatred, and tenebrous joy.

This was perhaps the most disturbing and frightening thing that Sunny had ever seen... and he had seen some of the most chilling horrors the Dream Realm had to offer.

'How can humans do this to other humans?'

But that question was moot, and also hypocritical. Humans were indeed the most adaptable of creatures. When they needed to, they were easily able to devoid their victims of the status of a human being, thus absolving themselves of any guilt or sin. Why feel guilty for slaughtering cattle?

Creatures worse than cattle, even. Hateful pests.

Sunny had practiced that simple mind trick himself in the past.

These thoughts only took him a fraction of a second. Jumping to his feet, Sunny summoned the Midnight Shard and dashed toward Nephis.

The slum dwellers, meanwhile, came to their senses and met the assault of the Host with as much fury and bloodlust. Even though they were less experienced, well-fed, and armed, their resolve and exalted fury made up for that.

"Protect Lady Nephis!"

"Kill the bastards!"

"Judgment!"

The two forces clashed, eviscerating anyone who had the misfortune of being stuck between them. Screams of terror and pain filled the great hall. The floor turned slippery with blood, and dead bodies piled on it, staring into emptiness with wide eyes.

Sunny saw the scarred hunter from before dive under the strike of a young Guard and drive the tip of his sword into the enemy's throat. He saw several Hunters of the Host lunge at Effie, who had easily tore the rope that bound her arms and met them with a ferocious grin, the beautiful bronze spear weaving itself from sparks of light in her hands. He saw Tessai crushing a random Sleeper's skull with a heavy mace. The poor youth was only guilty of getting in his way.

He saw people screaming in fear as they tried to flee the hall. Many fell on the floor, and were then crushed under the feet of the panicking crowd...

The problem was, he didn't see Caster.

Arriving near Nephis, Sunny batted someone's sword away and then punched his opponent in the face, causing him to fly back with a pained scream. He looked around, trying to notice the proud Legacy, his mind cold and collected...

And there, he saw him. Caster may have had plans to kill Changing Star at the moment of her weakness, but thanks to Sunny's subtle intervention, he had lost that chance.

Now, the Legacy had bigger problems on his plate. With the enchanted jian in his hand, he was fighting none other than Gemma, the leader of the Hunters. No matter how strong and skilled Caster was, this was not an opponent that would go down easily, if at all. He couldn't extricate himself from that fight without risking being killed.

'...Well. That problem seems to be solved.'

But now, there was another. Much bigger one.

Back at the steps leading up to the white throne, Harus was standing with his back turned to the slaughter below, a strangely disoriented expression frozen on his face.

Sunny could see his face because the shadow never left the darkness of the alcove, watching the dreadful hunchback's every move.

Harus was staring at Gunlaug's dead body, his glassy eyes confused and empty.

But then, slowly, a hint of a dark and deadly emotion appeared in them.

Turning around, he studied the great hall, not disturbed even a little by the bloody chaos, the clangor of steel, and the scores of people dying in front of him.

And then, his gaze fell on Nephis.

'Crap.'

At that moment, both Kai and Cassie appeared by Sunny's side. Turning to them, he gestured to Changing Star and yelled:

"Protect her!"

At the dais, Harus tilted his head, piercing Changing Star with a murderous gaze. Slowly, his face contorted, turning bestial and terrifying. Pure hatred and insanity burned in his eyes, making anyone who accidentally glanced in his direction shudder.

With a low growl, the hunchback took a step forward and outstretched his hand, ready to summon a weapon.

...But in the next moment, someone crashed into him at full speed. Even though Harus had dodged the flying blade at the last moment, the force of the impact was such that both men flew back, into the darkness behind the throne.

Breaking through a wooden hatch that was hidden there, Sunny and Harus rolled down a long flight of stone stairs and left the havoc of the great hall behind.

A few moments later, they landed on the floor of a wide corridor and were thrown away from each other. Sunny twisted his body to regain his balance and used the Midnight Shard to stop himself from sliding even farther away.

Then, he rose to his feet and looked darkly at Harus, who were similarly just standing up.

A cold glint appeared in his eyes.

Just like Sunny had expected... today, one of them was going to die.

Chapter 299: Twisted Reflection | Shadow Slave

Out in the great hall of the ancient castle, the air was full of screams and clangor of steel, with rivers of blood being spilled on the white marble floor. But in the wide corridor Sunny and Harus had found themselves in, the havoc that reigned above seemed muffled and distant. It was just the two of them here.

Picking up the Midnight Shard from the cold stones, Sunny flexed his shoulders and looked at the hunchback. There was a dark, icy fire burning deep within his eyes.

"...How wonderful. We are finally alone."

The hunchback tilted his head and stared at him with his glassy eyes, not saying anything. A slight smile appeared on Sunny's lips.

"What, no reaction? Well, fair enough. Allow me to introduce myself, then. My name is Sunny... and I've been craving to kill you for a long, long time."

Harus remained motionless, looking at him with the same indifferent, bored expression. A hint of anger appeared on Sunny's face.

Taking a subtle step sideways and slightly turning his torso, he said in a casual tone:

"To tell you the truth, Harus, I have killed many monsters. Some of them were Nightmare Creatures, and some were men. I killed a person or two, as well. But I have never done it out of malice. I've never enjoyed it... too much."

He paused and then spat, his voice shaking:

"But I will enjoy killing you."

Sunny grasped the hilt of the Midnight Shard with both hands and took a step forward, piercing the hunchback with a furious gaze.

"You embody everything that I despise. The mere fact of your existence offends me. You sicken me, and for that reason alone I am going to end you. You don't deserve to live."

Harus blinked and continued staring at him, motionless. Sunny stopped a few meters away and snarled, frustrated at the lack of response.

"Do you have any idea what I had to do, what I had to sacrifice, how many things I had to let go of to save myself from becoming someone's slave? And here you are... living as one of your own free will... bastard, what gives you the right? Who gave you the idea that you can breathe the same air as I do?!"

The hunchback finally showed a sign that he had heard Sunny. With a slightly irritated expression, he shook his head and said:

"Talk, talk, talk. You talk too much, little worm."

Sunny grinned. A dangerous spark appeared in his eyes:

"Yeah? Well, what are you going to do about it?"

Harus smiled, too.

His smile was cold, unnatural, and frightening.

"Break you. Apart. You will have to die, anyway. All of you will."

Sunny raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, really? Why is that?"

The hunchback shrugged and outstretched his hand. Weaved from the sparks of light, a heavy chain appeared from the air, wrapped around his arm from wrist to elbow. Then, he grimaced and straightened his back as much as his deformity allowed him.

Before, he seemed to be of the same height as Sunny. But now, Harus towered above him almost as much as Tessai had, his twisted figure radiating a sense of vicious, bestial power. As two menacing lights ignited in his pale eyes, he growled:

"Because this is the will of the Lord."

Sunny laughed.

"Lord? The Bright Lord? I don't want to disappoint you, fool, but your lord is dead."

Harus stared at him with sincere confusion. Then, a corner of his lips curled upward. With something that almost resembled pity, he said:

"Poor worm. You don't even understand what loyalty means, do you? Alive or dead... it doesn't matter."

Sunny snarled.

"You're right! I don't understand."

Finally, he raised his sword and prepared to attack.

"You know... I spent so much time trying to learn what your Aspect Ability and Flaw are. But now, I am glad that I don't know. I don't want to kill you using a trick. I just want to obliterate you..."

Harus listened to him. A mocking grin appeared on his lips.

...And then, Sunny suddenly became blind.

A moment before, Sunny was looking at the hateful figure of the fearsome hunchback. Then, suddenly, his sight was gone, replaced by nothing except for boundless darkness.

'Wh...'

Almost immediately, a monstrous blow sent him flying back. Sunny hit the wall of the corridor and then fell to the floor, leaving a trail of blood on the cold stones. His bones groaned, but held together, if barely.

Harus, who had hit him in the chest with a fist, the heavy chain wrapped around his knuckles, lunged forward with terrible speed, aiming to crush the enemy's skull under his boot. His movements were swift and utterly silent.

To his surprise, though, the little wretch somehow managed to roll away and jump back, avoiding death by a hair's breadth.

Sunny slid backward and rose to his feet, blindly swinging the Midnight Shard in a wide arc in front of him. The blade of the tachi missed the murderous hunchback entirely, but bought him a second to gather himself.

Not that it was going to help.

He was still blind.

'Of course... it all makes sense now.'

Sunny finally unraveled the mystery surrounding Harus. He understood why so many Sleepers, no matter how skilled and with no regard to the might of their Aspect Abilities, had been somehow rendered powerless and easily slaughtered by Gunalug's executioner.

He also understood why there were no witnesses to the countless murders that Harus had committed. No one had ever seen him killing his victims — their bodies were always found only after the slaughter was over.

It was not because the terrifying hunchback was able to move like a ghost or possessed such great power that no one could even try to resist it.

...It was because his Aspect Ability could literally make people not see him.

Or anything, for that matter.

It didn't matter how skilled or mighty his opponents were. Once they were blind, all their technique and Abilities were made useless. Killing a blind person was an easy task.

It also did not matter if someone was there to see Harus kill — as long as he wanted, he would remain unseen for as long as he wished.

That's how the legend of the horrifying butcher was born. People were always more afraid of things that they couldn't see, after all.

Sunny spat a mouthful of blood and grimaced.

It was nice to reveal another secret.

The question was... would he be able to survive knowing the truth?

Chapter 300: Bright Lord's Slave

By a twist of fate, today, Harus was facing possibly the worst opponent he could have faced on the Forgotten Shore... among the Sleepers, at least.

However, Sunny wasn't surprised.

He had always felt that he and the murderous hunchback were destined to end up fighting each other to the bitter end. Before, he had thought that this was just intuition, but now he knew that his occasional and subtle premonitions were anything but random.

All that time ago, he had already sensed that the two of them were connected by a string of fate.

Was it such a surprise, then, that his Aspect happened to counter that of Harus to large extent?

And it did counter it, although not completely.

If anyone else was in Sunny's place, they would have been already dead. Robbed of their sight, very few people — if anyone at all — could have resisted the furious assault of the terrifyingly strong hunchback. But Sunny wasn't just anyone.

Even while blind, he had Shadow Sense on his side. While it wasn't the same as being able to see Harus, by sensing the movements of his shadow, Sunny was able to predict his attacks with at least some level of precision.

It wasn't perfect, though. At least he had not reached the level where this form of perception could fully replace vision.

So, now, Sunny had a choice to make.

While his shadow was wrapped around his body, it gave him an incredible boost in strength, speed, and endurance. It wasn't able to provide him with a second pair of eyes, however.

So he could either continue to rely solely on Shadow Sense and keep this boost, or let the shadow go and fight Harus with just his own strength while being able to see.

'Decisions, decisions...'

Sensing the hunched shadow of the murderous butcher lunge forward, Sunny dodged left and heard something whistle past his temple with terrible speed. A fraction of a second later, and his skull would have been crushed by the links of the iron chain wrapped around his enemy's fist.

He missed the hunchback's other hand, though.

His wrist was suddenly caught in an iron grip and twisted, forcing Sunny to yelp and let go of the Midnight Shard. Another second, and his bones were going to shatter...

Following the direction of the twist, Sunny performed an aerial cartwheel to save his arm and reluctantly ordered the shadow to slip off his body.

As he landed on the stones, Sunny was finally able to see again.

Harus was holding him by the wrist with one hand, his other raising to deliver a crushing blow. Sunny doubted that there would be anything left of his face if he were to allow that blow to land.

...He still held the Midnight Shard in his free hand.

Turning the tachi upward, Sunny thrust it in the direction of the hunchbacks' throat. As a hint of surprise appeared in his enemy's eyes, Harus changed the direction of his strike, turning it into a block instead.

The razor-sharp blade bit into the links of the heavy chain wrapped tightly around his forearm and bounced off.

However, that gave Sunny the opportunity to wrestle his wrist free and jump back. Despite the fact that his bruised hand was shaking, he put it back on the hilt of the Midnight Shard and faced Harus once again.

The hunchback tilted his head and stared at Sunny with an amused expression.

"Slippery worm... how are you doing that?"

Sunny grinned.

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

Then, he grimaced and added after a few moments of pained silence.

"...I can still see you thanks to my Aspect."

Harus grinned.

"Oh? Good... it is nice of you to tell me..."

With that, he suddenly threw his hand forward.

'What is he doing?'

The distance between them was too large to land a punch...

But in the next moment, Sunny realized his mistake. It was too late, however.

The chain suddenly flew off the hunchback arm and instantly covered the distance between them. Before Sunny could react, it was tightly wrapped around the blade of the Midnight Shard.

Then, Harus pulled it back with tremendous force.

Sunny could either allow himself to be thrown to the floor right in front of the cruel executioner or let go of his sword. He chose the second option.

The Midnight Shard flew far away and fell on the marble floor with a melodious ringing. There was little hope of retrieving it... and Sunny doubted that Harus was going to give him enough time to dismiss and summon the tachi again.

Indeed, almost instantly, the fearsome hunchback was already lunging at him, the iron hammers of his fists ready to break every bone in Sunny's body.

'Go die, bastard!'

Sunny growled and dashed forward. Dodging a deadly, strike, he twisted his body and delivered a ferocious blow of his own. His fist connected to the hunchback's chin, making Harus reel back.

Sunny might have been lean and not as tall as most men, but he wasn't a weak outskirt kid anymore.

The power of nine hundred shadow fragments, each earned in a deadly fight against unimaginable horrors, coursed through his veins. He was much stronger than he looked.

Strong enough to shatter stones with his bare hands.

...And yet, he wasn't nearly as strong as Harus. While shaken by the blow to the face, the hunchback didn't look seriously hurt. But his next strike almost made Sunny buckle.

For a few short moments, the two of them became entwined in violent, barbarous combat. Using their fists, legs, and even teeth, they did anything in their power to destroy the enemy. Harus fought with the measured skill of an experienced killer, while Sunny fought with the desperate, feral cunning that his cruel upbringing had taught him.

The hunchback was at a dire advantage in that fight. With his tremendous might and much larger weight and reach, all he had to do to win it was to wrestle Sunny to the ground. Knowing that, Sunny had done everything in his power to avoid being grappled. He twisted and moved, dodging the hunchback's large hands and delivering strike after strike.

Soon, Harus was bleeding from a half-dozen cuts on his angular face. Sunny, however, was in much worse shape. The hunchback's fists, and especially that damned chain of his, had left terrible marks on his body. The

skin on his forehead was split open, and a stream of blood was flowing down his face.

Usually, that would have blinded a person. But both of his eyes were already blind; he was using his shadow to see.

'...How ironic.'

Still, it was just a matter of time before Sunny made a mistake. And very soon, he did.

Sunny was only a fraction of a second late, but it was all Harus needed to land one of his wide palms on his shoulder. Then, he gripped it with enough strength to make Sunny's bones groan, thus robbing the enemy of his only advantage — mobility.

As Sunny's eyes opened wide, the hunchback grinned.

"...Time to die, little worm."

With that, he threw him against the wall, making a net of cracks streak through its stone surface. Hurt and disoriented, Sunny felt something cold and inevitable grip his neck.

Looking his victim right in the eyes, Harus squeezed Sunny's neck and smiled.

"Good. It's good that you can see. Usually, they don't. Such a pity..."

Sunny raised his fist and hit the hunchback in the face, but to no result. He couldn't find the proper purchase or move his torso to deliver a proper blow.

Regardless, he tried again, then again, then again.

The skin on the face of his strangler split, letting more blood flow, but Harus just continued smiling, looking at him with fascination.

"Good. Good. This is so good... so, so good..."

Sunny weakly raised his hand again, but lingered, hesitating before trying to hit the hunchback again.

With what little air remained in his lungs, he wheezed:

"Hey, bastard... do you remember... how I told you... that I didn't want to use a trick... to kill you?"

Harus simply grinned.

"...well... that... that was a trick..."

At the same time, he struck the hunchback in the face again. Knowing that these punches were not strong enough to change anything, Harus didn't react.

But this time, a ghostly blade suddenly appeared in Sunny's hand at the last moment. Unlike normal Memories, this one weaved itself from nothing and almost instantaneously.

Then, it pierced Harus's temple and sunk deep into his brain, killing him on the spot.

The grin froze on the hunchback's lips. His eyes widened, then slowly turned glassy. His terrible grip on Sunny's throat weakened.

Then, he crumpled to the ground like a broken mannequin, his empty eyes still open and staring into nothingness.

Sunny fell to his knees and drew a hoarse breath.

"Die... you bastard. Die, die, die..."

A wicked, furious grin appeared on his face.

"Die and go keep your lord company in hell!"

Shaking, he used the wall to stand up and looked at the dead butcher with a strange mix of hatred, triumph, and contempt.

After a while, he said:

"Don't want to doesn't mean I won't, you fool."

Chapter 301: Heirs to the Throne

As Sunny sat on the cold stones, wiping blood off his face and wincing from pain, the whole castle shook slightly, and dust fell from the ceiling of the wide corridor. Looking up, he frowned slightly, then turned to Harus and indifferently cut a strip of cloth from the hunchback's garments.

The corpse didn't mind.

Tying the cloth around his head to stop the blood from streaming into his eyes, Sunny sighed and summoned the runes.

Shadow Fragments: [956/1000].

"Such an injustice..."

His battle with Harus was one of the toughest he had experienced on the Forgotten Shore, but all he got from it was one measly shadow fragment. This was one of the lamentable quirks of the Shadow Slave Aspect — it didn't differentiate between humans and Nightmare Creatures at all. From its point of view, Harus was nothing but a dormant beast.

...Or maybe it was a blessing in disguise.

"Killing humans is a really unlucrative business," Sunny said with regret and glanced in the direction of the throne room, where the terrible battle still raged on.

Several hundred humans driven insane by fury and bloodlust could create a lot of destruction in a very short amount of time. Several hundred powerful Sleepers, each in possession of an Aspect Ability, were so much worse. Add the Echoes in the mix, and Sunny shuddered to imagine what was going on back in the great hall right now.

The number of lives being extinguished every second up there must have been immense. The members of the Host, the followers of Changing Star, and everyone unlucky enough to exist on the Forgotten Shore today were

dying by the score. Blood was flowing like a river in the halls of the Bright Castle... just like Cassie had predicted all those months ago.

Just like Sunny had feared it would.

What was Nephis thinking?

Her ambition had never been to become the ruler of the Dark City. Wrestling the control over the ancient castle from Gunlaug had always been just a means to an end. Her true goal had always been in the Crimson Spire.

...Where the Terror of the Forgotten Shore dwelt.

From that point of view, this massacre was such a waste. Of potential soldiers, of countless Memories, of every other potential resource she was going to need to reach the Gateway.

But then, was it really?

After all, the rest of humanity was not bound by the strangeness of the divine Aspect Sunny possessed. When one Awakened killed another, they received a vast portion of the soul essence their enemy had accumulated. A lot of it simply disappeared, but what remained was more than enough.

The Crimson Spire was not a place one could conquer with cannon fodder. So really, Nephis did not need a thousand weak humans. What she really needed was a few hundred powerful, battle-tested fighters.

What was happening in the Bright Castle right now was not a waste.

It was consolidation.

Sunny sighed and rose to his feet, summoning the Midnight Shard from the darkness of his soul.

It was time to rejoin the battle.

In the end, almost two hundred people perished on that day. Despite all that death, the battle ended in a bitter draw.

And the main reason for this were only three people: Nephis, Tessai, and Gemma.

No matter how powerful and skilled the rest of the Sleepers participating in the battle were, no one stood a chance in a fight against either one of these three. Not even Caster, who by then many had believed to be one of the strongest fighters in all of Dark City due to his incredible skill, powerful Aspect, and noble background.

When the proud Legacy clashed against the leader of the Hunters, his enchanted jian quickly found its way into Gemma's heart. However, to everyone's horror, the tall man did not even blink after receiving the mortal wound. And just a few short moments later, it magically closed, not leaving even a scar behind.

No matter how many times Caster had cut or pierced the body of the fearsome Hunter, Gemma's flesh simply restored itself. It was as though the proud Legacy was cutting water.

Gemma's Aspect Ability made him nearly immortal, while his incredible skill, cunning, and might made him a herald of death.

Tessai was equally as formidable. His powerful Aspect Ability was tied to cold and ice. It allowed him to both make his skin hard as stone and debilitate his enemies, turning their movements slow and stiff. What was worse, it countered Neph's flames to a large degree.

Eventually, when the death toll became too large, all three gave their followers a command to retreat.

By the end of the day, the new Lord of the Bright Castle was still not decided. The castle itself became divided between three warring factions, led by the three contenders to the throne.

The largest and strongest faction, one with the most fighters and most Memories to arm them, was formed by the alliance between Tessai and the leader of Handmaidens, Seishan. Together, the Guards and the Handmaidens became a force that the other two factions could not challenge openly. They held the northern and western parts of the Castle, where most of the strategic and easily defensible areas of it were situated.

The second faction was led by Gemma and Kido, the chief Artisan. While the two of them had fewer fighters than both other factions, each of these fighters was worth a dozen. They were the Hunters, the most experienced and formidable Sleepers in all of the Dark City. Although the territory this faction held was not large, it was of utmost importance, since they controlled the only reliable source of food and water in the Bright Castle.

The last faction belonged to Nephis alone. She controlled the southern part of the Castle, where its main gate was situated, as well as the outer settlement, to where many of the previous inhabitants of the ancient citadel had fled in hope of finding shelter.

However, they quickly realized that there was no more safety anywhere in the Dark City.

With Gunlaug gone, all order disappeared. No one went on hunts to bring back food, no one manned the walls to drive the Nightmare Creatures away, no one was there to stop the crime and violence that blossomed in darkness off anarchy.

And things weren't going to change until a new Lord usurped the white throne.

The bloody struggle for the crown had begun.

Chapter 302: Status Quo | Shadow Slave

In the next couple of weeks, the Bright Castle had become a strange place.

Inside its magnificent halls, barricades were built and three makeshift fortresses appeared, each faction holding a specific territory. Beyond these protected areas, there was no man's land. Going outside of a faction's stronghold was often tantamount to death.

No one knew what they would encounter there. Corpses littered the floor, with an occasional marauder hiding in the darkness. With no more law, tyrannical as it had been, many people gave in to their darkest impulses. But these wretches were the least of the dangers that now populated the Castle.

A much worse fate was to stumble onto a patrol or a war party of another faction. The Guards especially were quick to slaughter anyone they met, sometimes in gruesome and inventive ways. The Hunters and the followers of Changing Star were equally as ruthless, but at least not without reason or provocation.

But the most terrifying change was that now, humans weren't the only ones populating the ancient citadel anymore.

After Gunlaug's death, too many people were killed, and the rest were too busy with their little war to keep defending the Castle. And just like that, after so many years, the Nightmare Creatures had returned under its roof.

Some were killed by the representatives of the factions, but some managed to hide themselves and create nests somewhere in the depths of the stronghold. No one knew how many there were, but the terror kept people awake at night.

There were also a lot of rumors going around, one more frightening than the other. The most persistent of them told of a horrible creature called Blood Lord, which apparently stalked the corridors of the Bright Castle and killed humans, tearing their throats open with sharp fangs and consuming all of

their blood. Some even thought that it was Gunalug himself, who returned from the grave to bring vengeance to his killers.

Sunny was doubtful of these rumors up until the moment when he had found a bloodless corpse of a young Guard on one of his patrols. For a moment, he felt fear creep into his heart. He knew what the Blood Flowers were, after all. But then he calmed himself down, remembering that the Bright Lord's body had been destroyed during the massacre that followed his death.

If the corpse of Gunlaug wasn't walking around drinking people's blood, though... then what was?

There were a lot of disturbing things happening in the Castle these days.

Apart from the frequent but minor skirmishes between the factions, people kept dying in all manner of morbid ways. He didn't even want to think about it. There was no safe place anywhere now, except for maybe the three strongholds.

The outer settlement had been completely abandoned. At first, Nephis had tried to create a safe haven there for those who did not wish to participate in the war, but she was quickly taught a bloody lesson by her enemies — spreading her forces too thin was simply an invitation for an attack. After that, all of her followers, willing or unwilling, had relocated to the southern part of the Castle and joined the ranks of her fighting force.

And yet, even two weeks later, nothing had changed. The three factions continued their bloody struggle, unable to break the status quo.

Soon, something had to change.

One evening, Sunny was sitting on a crate in one of the halls of Changing Star's stronghold. In his hand was a bowl with a measly ration, which he nevertheless was eating with a lot of enthusiasm.

A few meters away from him, a couple of Neph's followers were doing the same while having a conversation. Out of boredom, he listened to their voices as he ate.

"Have you heard? They found another dead Guard near the throne room. The Blood Lord got him."

"Good riddance. That thing really creeps me out, though."

"Yeah. Scary. But... do you know what I'm really afraid of?"

The slum dweller looked at his partner, who had been paying a tribute to live in the castle just a few weeks ago, and raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

"Harus. That creepy bastard. Where is he now? Damn, if I were able to dream, I sure I would be having nightmares about that butcher every night."

"...Wait. You didn't hear?"

"What?"

"He's dead."

The tributary opened his eyes wide, while Sunny turned away and tried to suppress a smile.

"No way!"

"Yeah. They found his body after the big battle in a hidden passage behind the throne. Someone had... had beaten him to death. With bare fists. That's what I heard."

For a few seconds, there was silence. Then, one of them said:

"What kind of human could kill that monster? With bare hands?"

The slum dweller shivered.

"That's the thing. No one knows. All of the powerhouses were accounted for. You saw it yourself, they were all fighting in the throne room."

"...Crap. Now I am even more scared. Harus was dreadful enough, but to think that there's a person in this Castle who is powerful enough to kill him so easily... while remaining completely unnoticed and unknown, for all this time... damn, that's terrifying."

The slum dweller gave him a nod and turned to Sunny:

"Hey... Sunny, right? You're Lady Nephis's scout? Who do you think could kill Harus?"

Sunny thought for a moment and then said honestly:

"Well... apart from yours truly, who is a true terror on the battlefield and possibly one of the deadliest Sleepers to ever exist in the world... uh... I think Cassie could."

The young man stared at him with disapproval and then shook his head.

"Not cool, man. Boasting is fine, I guess, but mocking Lady Cassia was really low of you."

Sunny blinked. When did he mock Cassie? Considering the Aspect Ability that Harus had possessed, she was really the next best person to fight the hunchback after Sunny himself. She was already blind and adapted to fighting in that state as best as she could. With the help of her Echoes, Cassie stood a good chance of surviving that battle.

With an apologetic smile, he shrugged and said:

"Sorry, I just chose my words badly. In any case, I'm off."

With that, he jumped off the crate and headed toward the barricade that served as the border of the faction's stronghold.

The slum dweller raised his eyebrows.

"Where are you going? The night is approaching!"

Sunny grinned.

"Hunting for a big one. Ah, don't worry. I lived in the Dark City for three months, remember? Nothing is going to happen to me today..."

Chapter 303: Helpful Shadow | Shadow Slave

The slum dweller pressed his finger against his lips and hissed in exasperation:

"Take that back! Are you crazy?"

Sunny blinked.

"What? No. Well, I was crazy for a while. But now I am not."

The young man looked at him with doubt and shook his head:

"Still, don't jinx yourself. Do you at least have a Memory to keep you safe?"

The question of arming themselves was a big problem for Neph's followers. More than half of them didn't have a Memory armor or a weapon, having to make do with mundane armaments fashioned out of anything that was at hand. It was one of the reasons why fighting against the Guards and the Hunters was so hard for them.

The other guy, the one who used to pay tribute, sighed and call out to his friend:

"Have you lost your mind? You are talking to a member of Lady Nephis's personal cohort. Of course he has Memories."

With that, both of them looked down on their own makeshift swords.

These two were among those who wielded Black Claws, blades made out of the talons of the Spire Messenger Sunny and the rest had killed. Their bases were wrapped with leather, allowing a person to use the long curved talon as a weapon.

Considering that these talons came from a Fallen Monster, as far as weapons went, they were some of the best. Wielding them efficiently was

not an easy task, though.

The slum dweller grimaced.

"Right. Damn! I am proud to wield one of the Black Claws, don't get me wrong. But if each of us had a proper set of Memories... those bastards wouldn't be picking us off one by one anymore, that's for sure."

Sunny looked at him with a complicated expression. Then, he smiled.

"A good Memory can change a lot, that's true."

As soon as he turned around, the smile disappeared from his face.

'...It's not going to save your lives, though. All of you are just walking corpses.'

With that, he left the two Sleepers behind, climbed over the barricade, and left.

Nevertheless, they were right. The lack of Memories was a big problem.

...Sunny walked through the shadows, moving deeper and deeper into the belly of the ancient citadel. The Bright Castle was enormous in size and had countless twisting corridors. Some were comparatively easy to navigate, while some followed no apparent logic. There were tall towers connected by aerial bridges and deep dungeons full of darkness and danger.

There were humans with murder in their hearts prowling these corridors, as well as much more terrifying things. Disturbing sounds sometimes echoed through the stone halls, making Sunny stop and frown.

A couple of times, he decided to hide to avoid being noticed by the patrols of the Guards or the Hunters. Following in their wake, he stumbled on a few fresh bodies and regretted not killing those bastards when he had the chance.

Half an hour later, Sunny was somewhere under the main keep of the Castle, moving through a dark corridor with careful steps. It was then then

that he heard the sounds of a struggle coming from beyond the next turn.

'...Ugh, what a bother.'

Hesitating for a bit, he made the turn and witnessed a scene that was typical in the ancient citadel these days.

One human was trying to kill another.

In this case, it was a burly Guard that seemed vaguely familiar. The large man was pressing someone small and skinny to the wall, strangling them with gauntleted hands. A broken oil lantern was burning on the floor, making the shadows of the two struggling people seem large and menacing.

The Guard's face had four deep scratches on it, which were oozing blood. It was contorted in an expression of rage and dark delight. The face of his victim, meanwhile, was slowly turning blue.

It was a petite young woman with dark hair and brown eyes, which were currently full of pain and despair.

Just a few moments before she lost consciousness, though, a hand appeared from the darkness and slid a strange transparent dagger across the Guard's throat. Hot blood shot into the air, and he fell to the ground with a horrified, gurgling sound.

The young woman staggered and drew in a hoarse breath, rubbing her bruised neck. A few moments later, she looked up and cautiously studied her savior.

It was a very pale, slender young man with a youthful face and dark, strangely magnetic eyes. Currently, he was wiping his dagger on the sleeve of his armor and staring at the dying Guard with an indifferent expression.

In fact, he was disturbingly nonchalant, not at all like someone who had just killed another human being. There was neither disgust and fear nor delight and triumph on his face, just... nothing at all.

It was the face of a cold-blooded killer.

Turning to her, the young man smiled:

"Uh... you're Aiko, right?"

Sunny looked the young woman over, making sure that she wasn't seriously wounded. He knew her a bit from his days in the Castle. Back then, she had been one of the few people who were able to pay tribute without worrying about making enough shards to do so the next week.

She owned the only gambling den in the Dark City, which automatically made her establishment popular among the members of the Host. But it was also the reason why many of them harbored resentment toward the tiny girl.

Aiko cautiously nodded. Usually, there were mischievous sparks in her eyes, but right now, there was nothing but subdued fear. Sunny dismissed the Moonlight Shard and said in a friendly tone:

"Nice to meet you. I'm Sunny."

The young woman stared at him for a bit, and then said:

"You're one of Changing Star's men, right?"

He grimaced.

"I'm no one's man. I'm completely my own. But yes, currently, Nephis is my... employer, I guess."

Aiko hesitated and said in a polite and pleasant voice:

"I see... well, Sunny. Thank you for saving my skin. I'll be going then."

Sunny grinned.

"Oh, I'm sorry... did I say that you can go? I think not. In fact, I must insist that you stay."

Aiko glanced at the corpse of the Guard, then back at the pale young man. Did she imagine it or were there slight hints of madness in his eyes now?

"Ah, why didn't you say so! If you want me to stay, then I will definitely stay. It will be my pleasure, really. But, uh, Sunny... why exactly did you want me to stay?"

He scratched the back of his head and answered after a bit of a pause:

"Oh, I'm glad that you asked. You see, I am trying to hunt down a big one. And I thought that you would be able to help..."

Chapter 304: Hunting for a Big One

Sunny stared at Aiko, secretly delighted that he didn't have to look up for a change. The young woman's eyes darted into the depths of the corridor, clearly evaluating how good her chances of running away were.

...They weren't.

In the end, she sighed and turned to Sunny with a deep frown. For some reason, such a serious expression looked a bit comical on her petite face.

"Sunny, was it? Listen, buddy... uh... boss. I am really thankful to you for helping me out, but honestly, do I look like a hunter? How am I supposed to help you hunt? Maybe go ask one of your strong manly friends..."

Then, her eyes widened.

"You're not planning on using me as bait, are you?"

Sunny chuckled.

"No, no. Nothing like that. It's just that for this particular hunt, you are the only one who can help. By the way, I didn't just stumble on you by chance. I was watching you for a long time, actually."

She paled a little.

"Ah, I see. Well... to each their own, I guess. But still, I am no warrior. I really think that I won't be able to help you out this time, sadly..."

Sunny shook his head.

"Relax, Aiko. You see, the big one I'm hunting... is a friend of yours. Big, fat bastard named Stev. He's the one I'm after. And I know for a fact that you know where he is hiding. Because you're the one hiding him. So..."

An expression of utter surprise appeared on Aiko's face. With sincere confusion, she asked:

"Wait, what? Stev? The Memory Market guy? Why the Spell would I know where he is?!"

She blinked a couple of times, then said in a hesitant tone:

"Are you sure you're not confusing me with someone, Sunny?"

He sighed and lingered for a few moments, then rolled his eyes.

"Alright. I don't really want to waste time here, so we'll do it the quick way. Look there."

He pointed to his shadow. Aiko lowered her eyes, which then widened when the shadow suddenly turned its head and waved to her.

"What the..."

Sunny crossed his arms and said:

"This here is my shadow. It's an invaluable helper. Among other things, it can walk around on its own and report back to me the things it saw. Guess what it saw yesterday?"

Aiko paled, staring at the shadow with wide eyes.

The shadow stared back at her, full of disdain.

"So... let's not pretend that you don't know where Stev is. Just take me to him."

The young woman glanced at him and gritted her teeth. Then, she asked with dark resolve in her eyes:

"What do you want from him?"

Sunny raised his eyebrows.

"What do I want? That guy is walking around with a hundred Memories in his soul core. Guess."

Aiko clenched her tiny fists.

"He's my friend. I'm not going to..."

Sunny waved her hand and interrupted her.

"Oh, don't be so dramatic. I'm not going to do anything bad to him. If I wanted to, I would have killed you already. My shadow saw where you were going already, remember?"

In fact, Sunny was bluffing. While he was almost sure that Aiko was hiding Stev because of how much food she was stealing every couple of days — too much for such a tiny girl to eat on her own — he had no idea where her hideout was.

That was because it was situated somewhere past the Guard's territory, and Sunny had avoided sending his shadow anywhere near where Seishan was.

A stunned expression appeared on her face. After a while, Aiko asked:

"You really are not going to hurt us?"

Sunny offered her his most friendly, honest smile.

For some reason, the petite girl shuddered.

"I am not, you can trust me. I am the most honest man in the world, after all. Two worlds, even..."

A few hours later, three figures were sneaking through the corridors of the Bright Castle. One was a pale young man in dark leather armor, the second was a petite girl with mischievous eyes, and the third was a giant of a man with a vast round belly.

Because of him, all their attempts of being stealthy were rendered practically useless.

Nearing another corner, Sunny sighed and gave the other two a signal to stop.

"The Guards are patrolling ahead. We'll have to wait for a bit."

Stev and Aiko glanced at each other and shrugged. Because of their difference in size, the two looked nothing short of comical together. Shaking his head, Sunny summoned the Endless Spring and took a few sips of water, then offered the beautiful glass bottle to them.

"Why were you hiding from everyone anyway, Stev?"

The ample giant looked at him with a sullen expression, then said in a depressed tone:

"Why else? As soon as this mess started, I knew that people would be coming for me to get the Memories."

Sunny frowned.

"The Memory Market belonged to the Host, so why didn't you just go to either Tessai or Gemma?"

Stev grimaced.

"I know Tessai too well to go anywhere near him with Lord Gunlaug gone. As for Gemma — we're on friendly terms, actually. But that girl, Kido... uh, let's just say that I called her a few names in the past. Over a, uh... business dispute, one might say. Who knew she'll go and become one of the lieutenants? Anyway, I was afraid for my safety because she and Gemma are, you know..."

Sunny raised an eyebrow, then asked in an curious tone:

"Then what about Nephis?"

Aiko gave him a complicated look.

"We heard that her people don't treat us Castle folk well. And Stev was even officially under the Host, so... we sort of had nowhere to go."

Sunny frowned. There was indeed a measure of internal strife in Neph's faction, with some outer settlement people being against anyone from the Castle joining them. Changing Star and the members of her cohort tried to prevent anything too nasty from happening, but they couldn't be everywhere at once.

"There are a few troublemakers, true. But you'll be fine. Just say that you're with me."

He thought for a couple of moments, and then corrected himself:

"Actually, don't say that. Most of them barely know who I am. Say that you're with Night. And if Night asks why are you going around telling people that you're with him, then tell him that you're with me."

The two of them suddenly looked at him.

"My buddy Kai is alive? That's wonderful news!" Stev said with a wide smile.

On Aiko's face, a dreamy expression appeared.

"Why haven't you told me that you knew Night from the start? That would have made things so much easier!"

Sunny stared at them and shook his head.

"Pick up your drool, will you?"

Why had he even spent a whole hour trying to convince Stev to return with him? He could have just taken Kai with him, and the damn bastard would just say yes after one smile from the beautiful archer.

'So unfair...'

Then, he suddenly turned his head and froze.

Something was wrong. Very, very wrong. The Guards that were supposed to walk past his shadow a whole minute ago... never appeared.

Chapter 305: Trail of Blood

Raising his hand, Sunny gave Aiko and Stev a signal to remain quiet. Then, with a frown, he commanded the shadow to abandon its hiding spot and find the Guards.

'They can't be near us... I would have heard them.'

Then where did the bastards go?

Soon, he had his answer.

The three Guards were in the corridor a hundred or so steps from Sunny's current position, just behind a corner. In a place where they shouldn't have been, since it was way off their previous route.

They were also dead.

Two had their skulls smashed in. Sunny did not know what weapon, tool, or limb was used to kill them, because their Memory armors had already disappeared. It had to have been something capable of piercing through steel, though, because the Guards had been wearing helmets the last time he saw them.

The third was even worse. His throat was torn, seemingly with terribly sharp fangs... to such degree that the young man's head was almost separated from his body. One would expect a sea of blood to come out of such a terrible wound, but in fact, there was surprisingly little of it on the floor.

However, the corpse of the Guard was unnaturally pale, as if devoid of blood completely.

'Curses...'

Sunny felt a cold shiver run through his body.

The shadow cautiously looked around, but didn't notice anyone else present on the scene of the gruesome slaughter.

Aiko and Stev were staring at Sunny with alarmed expressions. After waiting for several minutes, he finally relaxed a little and motioned for them to follow.

"What happened?"

He hesitated for a few seconds, then said in an even tone:

"The Blood Lord has just been here."

Their eyes widened.

"That fiend?! Then why aren't we running?!"

Sunny glanced at them with a calm expression.

"Don't worry, it's already gone."

Inside, however, he was anything but calm.

A creature capable of killing three Guards was not necessarily something he would be scared of. One that managed to get past his shadow and slaughter them just a hundred steps away without making enough noise to attract his attention... that, on the other hand, was a reason for concern.

'Just what kind of an abomination is it?'

Sadly, the three of them had to pass the place where the Guards had been killed to reach their destination. Soon, the smell of blood hit their nostrils, making Aiko and Stev turn pale.

The bodies of the Guards looked even more gruesome in person. Sunny frowned slightly, while Aiko and Stev had to struggle to keep the contents of their stomachs inside.

"Gods... poor bastards..."

Sunny did not say anything, looking around with a dark expression. He was hoping to notice something that his shadow had missed to give him a clue of what type of Nightmare Creature the Blood Lord was, exactly.

But there were no signs that anyone except for the three Guards had been in this corridor in a long time.

"Hey, Sunny? Can we please leave? This crap doesn't seem to bother you, but I... I mean, Stev seems to be really scared. Just imagine what is going to happen if he faints and falls. The whole Castle will hear, probably..."

Sunny hesitated for a little, then nodded.

Just before they left, however, he suddenly noticed something glint in the pool of blood. The shadow had not noticed it earlier because there was nothing to shine on the small object and make it reflect the light back.

Crouching, he reached out with his hand and picked up the bloodied piece of metal, then brought it close to his eyes to take a closer look.

Pressed between his fingers was an intricate silver earring in the shape of a flower blossom. It wasn't a charm Memory, though... just a simple piece of jewelry.

'What is that thing doing here?'

With a confused scowl, he lingered for a few moments and then stood up, turning away from the mangled corpses.

"Let's get out of here..."

Soon, they returned to the barricades creating the border of Changing Star's territory. The Sleepers standing watch were surprised to see Sunny come back with two strangers, but let them in without asking any questions.

Aiko raised an eyebrow.

"Aren't you guys going to inspect us? What if we're spies?"

The watchmen glanced at each other, and then one of them said:

"Usually, we would. But it's Sunny."

The petite young woman smiled.

"Oh! Is he in very high regard around here?"

The watchman gave a strange look, then coughed with a bit of embarrassment.

"Uh... it's not that. It's just that starting a conversation with him is, uh... well, you know. A headache."

Sunny stared at him with an offended expression.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The watchman hurriedly shook his head.

"No, no. Nothing. Uh, I need to inspect the barricade. If you'll excuse me..."

With that, he made a hasty retreat.

'Did I scam him out of his boots or something?'

Shaking his head in bewilderment, Sunny turned away and led the two newcomers deeper into the stronghold, searching for Nephis.

She was alone in a spacious room. Changing Star sat on the floor, wrapping herself in her white cloak, and stared at the wall with a distant expression.

These days, Neph was a bit strange. She had always been aloof and hard to read, but now, her usually indifferent face had become completely motionless. Her grey eyes had always been calm, but now, they seemed to be especially cold. Almost... empty.

Sunny had no idea what was going on with her.

'Maybe she hasn't recovered from using her Aspect Ability to its full extent, still...'

Clearing his throat to attract her attention, Sunny gestured to the giant man and the tiny girl he brought.

"Hey, Neph. I've recruited these guys."

She tilted her head a little and didn't say anything.

Sunny smiled.

"You must remember Aiko. She was the one on whose behalf you had challenged that Pathfinder, Andel. And cut his head off."

Then, he glanced at Aiko and narrowed his eyes.

The petite girl hurriedly said:

"Oh, yes! Thank you, Lady Changing Star. That guy was... uh... a real menace."

Nephis slowly nodded and said evenly:

"...You're welcome."

Then, she looked at Stev.

"...And you are?"

A wide grin appeared on Sunny's face.

"Oh. This is Stev. Stev is a very special guy. You see... he has a hundred battle-ready Memories stored in his soul core."

With that, Sunny patted Stev on the shoulder and said:

"...Basically, he's going to solve our weapons problem."

Chapter 306: Final Confrontation | Shadow Slave

With all of Memory Market suddenly falling into the hands of Changing Star's faction, the skirmishes happening in the halls of the Bright Castle became even more frequent and brutal. People kept killing each other, slowly painting the who citadel red.

And yet, it was still not enough for a winner to emerge.

Nephis was always on the frontlines, leading her people and slaying countless enemies with her silver blade, as if alien to the very concept of mercy. Wherever she appeared, blood flowed like a river. She had even clashed against Tessai personally, but their fearsome battle ended in a draw.

Now that more than two weeks had passed after Gunlaug's death and the decimation of the previous order, humans were starting to suffer from the lack of food. There were more and more Nightmare Creatures finding their way into the Castle, too. The situation was slowly turning into an irreversible crisis.

In fact, it already had.

The civil war raged on, reaping human lives one after another. But it was also forging those who remained alive into much more fearsome, powerful, and hardened fighters.

And then, suddenly, the status quo was finally decimated, announcing to everyone left alive in the Bright Castle that the end was drawing close.

The new Lord was about to take his crown. And it was not going to be the most noble or formidable of the candidates.

It was going to be the most vicious.

The news arrived in the stronghold of the Changing Star's faction at the darkest hour of the night. The scouts sent into the depths of the Castle returned one after another, bringing with them shocking news.

The Castle Guard had secretly launched an all-out assault on the stronghold held jointly by Gemma and Kido. The Hunters were defeated, losing many of their numbers in the battle. Left without their protection, almost every Artisan had been captured by the Guards, while Kido herself had been killed by Tessai with his own two hands. After her death, Gemma and his surviving warriors had to flee.

After the scouts made their report, a heavy silence settled over the stronghold. Everyone understood what was going to happen next.

The faction formed by the alliance of the Guards and the Handmaidens had already been the most powerful of the three. Now that all the Artisans were in their hands and most of the Castle was under their control...

They would be coming for Changing Star and her people next.

In that silence, Nephis looked around, at the pale faces of her followers, and said after a long and poignant pause:

"...Stay strong. We will prevail."

However, for the first time, her words did not seem to convince them.

After a long and sleepless night, an unexpected visitor arrived in the stronghold.

It was Gemma, the mighty leader of the Hunters.

The tall man looked very different from how he had before. His laidback attitude was gone, replaced with dark exhaustion. His face was grim and ashen, and his light armor was torn and covered with blood.

He wished to speak with Changing Star.

After she arrived in front of him, Gemma offered her the services of his remaining men in the struggle against Tessai.

She tilted her head and asked, her voice emotionless:

"What about your ambitions? Didn't you want to become the next Lord?"

Gemma was silent for a long time, the fire extinguished in his eyes. Finally, he said:

"I never wanted to be a Lord. It was Kido's wish. Now that that damn butcher... now that she's dead, I don't care about the throne anymore."

He paused, a mournful shadow veiling his eyes. But then, embers of scathing hatred ignited in its depths. Gemma gritted his teeth.

"All I care about is to see Tessai die. If you can promise me that you'll defeat him, I and my Hunters will follow you to the end."

Nephis was silent for a while, considering his words. Finally, she turned away and answered:

"Signal for you men to come. We have some food to share, so eat your fill. Prepare for tomorrow."

With that, she walked away.

Gemma stared at her back and yelled:

"What happens tomorrow?!"

Changing Star paused for a moment, then answered without turning her head:

"...Tomorrow, I will kill Tessai."

The next day, there were no scouts and no patrols sent out in the morning. Instead, everyone armed themselves, gathered together, and marched to the throne room.

Nephis was walking at the head of her army, clad in the stark black and white armor of the Starlight Legion.

On her breastplate, seven shining stars were engraved.

The great hall was just as they had left it three weeks ago. During that time, members of all three factions had gathered the bodies of their dead to give them proper burials, but the white marble floor was still painted red with blood.

Tessai and his people were already waiting for them there.

The morose giant was sitting on the throne, looking down from its height. In his hands, there was a terrifying heavy mace, still wet from the slaughter.

Sunny grimaced, noticing the difference between the two armies.

Despite all their losses, there were still almost a hundred Guards left alive. Not only were they better equipped and trained than the slum dwellers, but now they also had the captured Artisans on their side, supplying them with all kinds of tools, gear, and deadly inventions.

The Artisans themselves were beside them, some of them bound and chained, some simply intimidated into submission. Their faces were pale, frightened, and bloodied. From their position in front of the Guards, it seemed as though Tessai was planning to use these poor people as a meat shield against Changing Star's assault.

The Handmaidens were also there, standing silently behind the guards. These quiet young women used to maintain the Castle and complete various chores around it, but they were capable fighters as well. Since they had not participated in the furious battle that had happened after Gunlaug's death, their number did not diminish by much. There were around a hundred of them, too.

Their leader, Seishan, was also there, at the base of the stairs that led to the throne. Looking at her, Sunny felt a cold shiver run down his spine.

He couldn't explain it, but this beautiful and strange woman made him feel fear for some reason.

At a first glance, Nephis had more people on her side. There were slightly more than three hundred of them, comprised mostly of the surviving slum dwellers, with several dozen tributaries and a dozen or so Hunters added into the mix.

...But really, only about a half of them was worth anything in the fight against the battle-hardened Guards.

Altogether, these were all the humans left alive in the Dark City. Just shy of six hundred.

Everyone else was already dead.

And how many more were going to die today?

Chapter 307: Throne of Light

Two forces stood against each other, the desecrated expanse of the great hall separating them... for now. The tense silence was full of bloodlust and dark apprehension.

Sunny slowly made his way to the first row of the crowd, staring at the opposing mass of armored warriors with a complicated expression. From his point of view, followers of Changing Star had little chance of winning this battle.

They simply had no advantage against the Castle Guard — with the exception of the fact that there were more bodies they could throw at the sharp blades of the enemy. Even if everyone here was mundane human, that would not have helped them prevail against a better-armed and trained force.

The fact that every single human in the throne room was a Sleeper only made things worse. The potential difference in power between two Awakened was much more vast than that between two mundane fighters.

And yet, he didn't think that Nephis was going to lose — for that same reason.

The Guards might have been better equipped and more experienced than the slum dwellers, but they didn't have Changing Star on their side. They didn't have Effie, Caster, and Gemma. They didn't have Sunny.

They only had two truly fearsome champions: Seishan and Tessai himself.

At the end of the day, the outcome of this battle was going to be decided by those few who stood out from the sea of Sleepers, impressive as everyone still surviving in the Dark City might have been, like tall and unassailable cliffs. Among the Awakened, individual power was so much more important. And in terms of exceptional individuals, the Changing Star's side was far superior.

So yes, Sunny felt confident that Nephis was going to win.

But at what cost?

Out here on the Forgotten Shore, people had nowhere to retreat. So this battle was going to end only after one side was totally annihilated. And the closer to utter annihilation a faction would come, the more desperately its members would fight... like rats driven into a corner. When that happened, the bloodshed would only grow more terrible.

Was it only going to stop when just a handful of the strongest and most resilient was left alive?

As if reading his thoughts, Tessai suddenly chuckled and looked at the crowd of people gathered in the throne room with a bloodthirsty smile.

'Is... is that bastard actually looking forward to the slaughter?'

The morose giant then looked directly at Nephis and grinned:

"Changing Star. Ah, we meet again. But... wait. Who is that beside you? Is that Gemma, my old friend? What a pleasant surprise! How considerate of you, to bring him here. Now I won't have to search the whole Castle for that filthy cockroach..."

With that, he slowly rose from the throne, put his terrifying mace on his shoulder, and descended from the stairs, dark fires igniting in his eyes.

"Have you come here to die, Changing Star?"

Nephis tilted her head and looked at Tessai with empty eyes.

"...No. I came here to kill you."

The giant laughed. Stepping on the marble floor, he stopped beside Seishan and bared his teeth in a vicious grin.

The two of them looked truly fearsome together. The morose giant was like an incarnation of destruction and violence. His skin had turned slightly blue

because of the invisible icy barrier that encased it. The air in the throne room suddenly became colder, with tiny snowflakes dancing in the beams of light.

The mysterious leader of the Handmaidens was reserved and elegant, but no less frightening.

Seishan was exquisitely beautiful, cold, and inexorable. She was wearing a simple, but strangely regal dress, its velvet the color of red wine. There was an intricate silver necklace resting on her chest that accentuated her supple figure, and two bracelets on her wrists.

Her most striking feature, however, was not her grace and not her beauty, but her skin. It was grey like stormy clouds, smooth like silk, and devoid of any imperfections.

Just like Nephis, Sieshan was one of those people whose appearance had been changed by their Aspect. But in her case, that change was far more pronounced. It gave her an exotic and tantalizing, but outwardly inhuman look.

Seishan's beauty was of the kind that put both longing and fear in a person's heart.

When Tessai approached, she silently summoned her weapon and stared coldly at the crowd of slum dwellers. Many of them shivered and hurriedly looked away.

A few moments later, a graceful war hammer appeared in her hand, one side of its head forged in the shape of a narrow beak.

The morose giant laughed.

"Kill me? Haven't you tried already? If memory serves, the last time we fought, you ran away like a cowardly dog. What makes you think that today is going to be different, bitch?"

Nephis raised her chin slightly and met his mocking gaze with silence.

Tessai shook his head.

"That look. I dreamed about wiping that arrogant look off your pretty face for a long time. Today, I am going to teach you how to beg, girl. So, what do you say? How about we finish this mess once and for all?"

The Guards standing behind him laughed and readied their weapons, looking at the slum dwellers opposing them with contempt and dark anticipation. Followers of Changing Star gritted their teeth, closing their ranks and preparing to charge.

The bloodshed was about to begin.

Nephis summoned her silver sword and answered Tessai, her voice cold and indifferent:

"...Let's."

For a moment, time slowed.

With a bestial smile, the giant stepped forward. He opened his mouth, ready to give his soldiers the command to attack.

A step behind, Seishan silently moved to follow him...

...And brought the beak of her war hammer on the back of Tessai's head, shattering his skull with one devastating strike.

At the same time, the Handmaidens who were standing behind the Guards attacked the unsuspecting men with long knives that appeared out of their sleeves. These knives were not Memories, and as such, did not take any time to weave themselves into reality or shine with ethereal light while doing so. Instead, they were fashioned out of steel, bone, and black obsidian.

Just a moment later, the blades plunged into the flesh of the Guards, ruthlessly slaughtering them. The Handmaidens were aiming for their throats, hearts, and eyes. Blood streamed on the marble floors once again, and screams of terrified agony filled the air.

By the time Tessai's soldiers realized what was happening, it was already too late. They had no chance to resist the treacherous attack.

A dozen seconds later, everything was over. A hundred powerful fighters were mercilessly eviscerated without even having a chance to raise their weapons. Their corpses lay on the floor, a look of horror and disbelief forever frozen on their faces.

...Only Tessai was still alive.

Despite the fact that his skull was broken, the giant was still struggling to stand up, fury contorting the lines of his face. His disoriented attempts, however, were growing weaker with each second.

A confused, pained roar escaped from his lips.

As hundreds of Sleepers stared in shock and horror, Nephis slowly walked across the great hall and stopped near him.

Seishan, who was standing behind the giant, gave her a respectful bow.

"Lady Changing Star."

Sunny stared at her war hammer, which was wet with blood and bone matter, with splinters of bone sticking to its metal surface. An expression of recognition suddenly appeared on his face.

"The hammer... the mason's hammer..."

Held in Seishan's graceful hand was the sixth Shard Memory. One that belonged to the walking colossus, the statue of the Builder who had created the walls of the Dark City.

The Sunlight Shard.

Nephis gave the beautiful woman a court nod.

"Good job."

Finally, the identity of the spy who had been helping her from within the Castle was revealed.

Then, she turned to the dying giant and stared at him. Neph's face was still and motionless, with no emotion appearing in her cold grey eyes. After a few moments, she said evenly:

"I promised to kill you."

With that, she raised her sword and pierced Tessai's heart with one swift, precise strike. The giant man shuddered, and then grew still.

Retrieving her sword, Nephis closed her eyes and used it to support her weight for a few moments. A slight tremor ran through her body.

The war for the throne was over.

The Bright Castle had finally found its new Lady.

Chapter 308: Handmaiden | Shadow Slave

In the aftermath of the Castle Guard's annihilation, the core members of the cohort gathered in a small room that was situated not far away from the great hall. From there, they could hear the bodies of the slain Guards being stripped of anything valuable and then dragged away to be disposed of... lest they attract the hordes of hungry Nightmare Creatures.

Just like that, the former most powerful faction of the Bright Castle was no more.

Judging by the expressions on everyone's faces, no one had been aware of the secret alliance between Nephis and the Handmaidens. Perhaps with the exception of Cassie.

But none of them dared to ask Changing Star about it.

Well, Sunny had no such problem.

Staring at their intrepid leader with a dubious expression, he said:

"So when did you start working with Seishan?"

Nephis glanced at him, then shrugged indifferently.

"Soon after you left."

A slight spark appeared in her eyes.

"Why? Are you surprised?"

Sunny remained silent for a bit, then shook his head.

"No, not really. I figured out that your spy was one of the lieutenants a long time ago. I just didn't know which one. But I thought that either your cooperation ended with Gunlaug's death, or that they double-crossed you as soon as you got rid of him for them."

Changing Star smiled darkly.

"...She wouldn't."

Sunny frowned slightly, then asked, his voice full of cold, calculating curiosity:

"So why didn't she join your faction when all of this had started? Why go to such lengths to create this charade?"

But then, he raised his hand to stop her from answering and grimaced.

"Actually, don't say anything. I can guess. If the Handmaidens joined us directly, the power of the faction would have been too immense. And that would pressure the other three lieutenants into joining forces against it instead of fighting among each other. Then, we would have really had to end things with an all-out battle, the last man standing wins. Right?"

Nephis glanced at him and nodded.

"Correct."

'Not only did the two of them prevent Tessai and Gemma from considering an alliance, but they also eviscerated the Castle Guard without losing a single follower. How... diabolical.'

Even a treacherous cheat like Sunny couldn't help but be impressed.

However, there was one problem. His frown returned, now even deeper than before.

"If memory serves, the last time we talked about your spy you said that she can never be trusted. You only trusted the information she provided. Why the change of heart? How come you were so confident that she would uphold her end of the deal?"

A pleasant, velvety voice suddenly came from behind him.

"Maybe I can explain myself."

'What the hell?!'

With a startled expression, Sunny turned around and saw the beautiful woman standing right in front of him. Up close, she was even more striking, with her strange grey skin seemingly shining softly in the sunlight.

'How did she get so close without alerting neither me nor my shadow?'

He didn't like the fact that Seishan had been able to sneak up on him one bit. Things like that were not supposed to happen...

The gorgeous woman, meanwhile, gave them a reserved bow and said:

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Song Sei Shan..."

Suddenly, Caster's eyes narrowed. A strange expression appeared on his face.

Sunny did not miss that sudden change.

'Well, the fact that our proud scion is reacting this way can mean only one thing. It's some Legacy crap.'

Sunny stared at Seishan, seeing her in a new light. He studied every detail of her appearance, from the modest cut of her velvet dress to the glinting silver of her intricate necklace.

She didn't look like a Legacy. At least not the ones he had seen.

However, one little detail of her appearance did give him pause...

Noticing his gaze, Seishan offered a polite smile.

"Ah. No, I am not a true descendant of the great clan Song. However, I have been raised and cared for by the Clan Leader herself, like many other girls orphaned by the Nightmare Spell. As such, it is my duty and ardent wish to return to the real world and repay my debt."

She lingered for a few seconds, then lowered her eyes.

"That is why, while you have no reason to trust in my character, you can at least trust in the fact that my wishes align with yours. I followed Gunlaug because only he was able to give people a chance to survive the Forgotten Shore. And I will follow Lady Changing Star, because only she can give us a chance to escape it. This is my belief, and this is what I will do. She is Broken Sword's daughter, after all."

Without having to discuss anything, everyone stared at Kai, who coughed and said in an embarrassed tone:

"Uh... yeah. All of this is true. She is very sincere."

Effie raised an eyebrow, then turned to Seishan and shrugged:

"Well... welcome to the team, then? I guess."

One after another, the other members of the cohort repeated her greeting. Sunny was the last to speak.

When it was his turn to greet the beautiful Handmaiden, however, he remained quiet. Soon, an awkward silence hung in the room.

Sunny glanced at the rest of the people gathered there.

Nephis, Cassie, Effie, Caster, Kai, Seishan... and him.

Seven people in total...

A few moments later, he turned to Seishan and stared at her for a bit, then finally said, his voice strangely suppressed:

"Welcome."

She looked at him with a reserved smile.

However, Sunny wasn't done talking. Quickly glancing somewhere left of Seishan's face, he hesitated for a little, and then added:

"Oh, right! I almost forgot. I found something of yours. I think you dropped it."

With that, he raised a hand. On his open palm, an intricate silver earring lay, one side of it covered with blood.

Seishan looked at it for a few moments. Then, her lips suddenly parted, her smile turning wide and brilliant.

Glancing at him with sparkling eyes, she said:

"Thank you very much... Sunny, right? I thought I lost it."

Her teeth were perfectly even, pearly, and spotlessly white.

Chapter 309: Where Dreams May Come

In the next week or so, things moved with terrible speed.

Nephis became the ruler of the Bright Castle without any type of glorious ceremony or impassioned speech. No one questioned her authority, anyway, as though it was a simple fact of life.

In a sense, it was.

Sunny found it interesting, however, that she didn't take her seat on the white throne of the ancient citadel once. Even when there was a need for a large gathering, Changing Star sat on the last step of the stairs leading to the throne. As if making a point to show that the Bright Castle did not belong to her... or, perhaps, that she did not belong to the Bright Castle.

At first, he was sure that Nephis was going to push people to march on the Crimson Spire immediately, but she didn't even mention it. When he confronted her about her plans, she simply said that they were going to wait until the winter solstice came before making any decisions.

It was just a few days away, anyway. In the meantime, everyone who was left alive had a lot to do.

There were just five hundred people in the Dark City now. In less than a month, the human population of the Forgotten Shore had been reduced by half. The outer settlement remained completely abandoned, but even then, there were barely enough people to maintain and guard the Bright Castle.

Nevertheless, they persevered.

The halls and corridors of the ancient citadel were cleaned of blood and corpses. The Nightmare Creatures that had found their way inside were methodically hunted down and eliminated. The breaches in the defensive lines they had created were located and repaired.

Neph's watchmen assumed the role of the obliterated Castle Guard, manning the walls and protecting the stronghold from outside threats. The hunting parties resumed their expeditions into the ruins, with hunters from the outer settlement and the Castle joining forces under the leadership of Effie and Gemma. Once again, there was food for everyone to eat and safety to enjoy.

Despite the harrowing hollowness and the absence of so many young men and women who had died in the turmoil of the bloody struggle for the throne, not to mention the invisible scars left on the souls of those who had survived, things were slowly starting to resemble how they had been before.

But behind this veil of normalcy, they were anything but. And the reason for that was Changing Star and her Crown of Dawn.

With the help of the miraculous Shard Memory, humans of the Dark City were now able to not only hunt more Nightmare Creatures and with less risk, but also challenge Fallen rulers of the cursed ruins. Not every one of these terrifying creatures could be killed without paying too terrible a price, of course. But after so many years on the Forgotten Shore, experienced Hunters knew a lot about various horrors populating the city. Putting the knowledge together, they determined which ones they could challenge and survive.

One after another, many powerful Nightmare Creatures were tracked down and slain. Suddenly, humans have become if not the apex species in the Dark City, then at least not the weakest one.

By killing Fallen abominations, Nephis was achieving several goals simultaneously. She was steadily accumulating an arsenal of Memories to arm every person in the Castle. Some of those Memories were even of the Ascended Rank, and the number of such powerful armaments slowly grew.

She and her warriors also brought back large quantities of soul shards, which were then given to the inhabitants of the Castle to absorb and grow stronger.

In an ironic twist of fate, it appeared as though now, it was the Bright Lady who was paying tribute to her subjects, and not the other way around.

This only made the respect and adoration people felt toward her grow stronger.

But most importantly, perhaps, was the fact that through these hunts, she was training her people to fight together as a cohesive force and prevail against creatures that were much more powerful than them.

Guided by Cassie, the surviving Artisans were hard at work, too. They were applying their mastery and craft to close any gaps in how the humans of the Dark City were equipped and supplied for the battle against the Dream Realm. However, the nature of their tasks was drastically different now.

If they had been in charge of maintaining the lifestyle of people leaving in the Castle as much as working to supply Gunlaug's Host with gear and equipment, now their only job was to create things people were going to need in battle.

It was as though they were preparing for war.

There were a few large projects that the Artisans were working on that Sunny knew little about, too. These things were requested from them by Nephis herself. He suspected that they were going to become useful once the time to attack the Crimson Spire finally came.

...Just like that, the winter solstice came.

On this day, exactly a year ago, Sunny had arrived on the Forgotten Shore. It was hard to believe that he had survived here for so long. That any of them had. But it also seemed as though one year was not enough to encompass it all.

It felt more like a lifetime. Several lifetimes, perhaps...

It was also on this day, a year later, that Sunny turned eighteen.

Remembering his previous birthday, a slight smile appeared on his lips. Back then, Cassie, who had been a complete stranger, offered him unexpected congratulations. He also made plans to celebrate his next birthday as an Awakened by drinking a cup of coffee with lots of milk and sugar.

Those dreams were not meant to come true.

Instead, Sunny met his eighteenth birthday in an empty hall of the Tower of Dusk, practicing the steps of the Shadow Dance, sweat streaming down his lithe and strong body.

These days, he felt that he was almost there. Just a little bit more, and the first level of mastery over his mysterious Aspect Legacy would be his. It was already in reach.

One more thing happened on that day.

As Sunny continued to train, the subtly familiar voice of the Spell suddenly whispered into his ear:

[...Your Shadow has evolved.]

Chapter 310: Shadow Demon | Shadow Slave

Lowering his sword, Sunny stood in the silence of the empty room for a while. In the window, the distant axis of the Crimson Spire loomed, the light of dawn slowly painting it red.

A subtle smile appeared on his face.

"Aww. Thank you, Spell. What a nice birthday present."

Summoning the Endless Spring, he greedily drank delicious cold water and then sat on the floor, crossing his legs and drawing a few deep breaths.

'Let's take a look...'

Leaving his worries behind, Sunny dove into the Soul Sea and walked past the rows of motionless shadows.

A long time ago, there had been just a handful of them. Now, hundreds of dark silhouettes watched silently as he approached the tenebrous sun of the Shadow Core. Among them were all kinds of horrors, creatures whose appearance alone would drive weaker men insane. The Mountain King was there. The Black Knight was there, too. The terrifying Spire Messenger stood lifelessly on the tranquil surface of the water.

...And there were humans, too. Harus was among them, and so was Harper.

Sunny didn't pay them any attention.

Standing beneath the Shadow Core, he sighed and summoned the runes.

Name: Sunless.

True Name: Lost from Light.

Rank: Dreamer.

Shadow Core: Dormant.

Shadow Fragments: [977/1000].

...He was so close to accumulating the whole thousand. If Sunny really wanted to, he could have abandoned caution and pushed to reach it before the inevitable journey to the Crimson Spire. However, he was wary of delving into anything unknown right before the fateful confrontation.

He also felt that his time was better spent consolidating and perfecting everything that he had already learned and earned, not wasting it trying to acquire something new.

Still, it was not an easy decision.

With a sigh, he continued reading.

Memories: [Silver Bell], [Puppeteer's Shroud], [Midnight Shard], [Ordinary Rock], [Prowling Thorn], [Endless Spring], [Blood Blossom], [Moonlight Shard], [M... ..old], [Weaver's Mask].

Echoes: —

Shadows...

He tilted his head and read, an amused expression appearing on his face:

...[Marble Saint].

...Marble?

'How fitting...'

Without wasting any more time, he summoned his Shadow from the depths of the Core. She appeared in a whirlwind of black flames, standing in front of him with her usual taciturn aloofness.

However, Sunny couldn't help but gasp.

The Saint was indeed changed. She grew taller and was now even more oppressive. Her graceful stonelike armor, which had looked as though it was cut from granite before, was now entirely black and glossy, like obsidian... or onyx. In fact, it was very much like the shattered onyx armor he had purchased with Kai's help.

Her skin, on the contrary, became smooth and as white as alabaster... at least the small portion of it he could see through the visor of the helmet.

Saint seemed much stronger, aware, deadly...

But that was not what made Sunny gasp.

The thing that stunned him was what hid beneath the armor. Within the shadow that populated Saint's body, there used to be two ethereal dark embers.

But now, there were three.

Sunny stared at her for a while.

'Did she... rise to a higher class?'

Finally, he calmed down and made the runes describing the Shadow appear. A moment later, his hopes were proved true:

Shadow: Marble Saint.

Shadow Rank: Awakened.

Shadow Class: Demon.

'Demon! She is a Shadow Demon now...'

Shadow Attributes: [Battle Master], [Stalwart], [Spark of Divinity].

The next line had not been there before. Sunny held his breath.

Shadow Abilities: [Weapon Sage], [Underworld Armament].

He lingered for a moment, trying to suppress a triumphant smile.

He had always known that Saint was not a typical Nightmare Creature. But to think that she would acquire an actual Ability before even becoming a devil... and not just one, but two!

Burning with anticipation, he read on:

Weapon Sage Ability Description: [Shadow Saint can effectively wield any weapon-type Memory.]

Underworld Armament Ability Description: [Shadow Saint's armor can accommodate a charm Memory to inherit its enchantments.]

Sunny was silent for a bit, then turned his head and stared at the taciturn monster... no, not monster.

Demon.

A satisfied smile finally appeared on his face.

"Ah. How wonderful..."

Not only had his Shadow grown tremendously stronger, but she now also had the ability to use any weapon he would provide for her, as well as reinforce her armor with all kinds of powerful enchantments.

The possibilities this could provide her were truly endless. The potential combinations, the flexibility... all it took was to find proper Memories.

Sunny shook his head and grinned.

Before, he had sometimes thought that Saint was really suited to command an army.

But now, he understood that he had been wrong.

...She was the army.

A few hours later, the members of Neph's cohort gathered on the roof of the old hunting lodge, which still stood at the edge of the slum. Seishan was also there, which made Sunny slightly uncomfortable. He didn't let it show on his face, however.

The outer settlement was desolate and empty. There were no desperate, hungry youths around anymore — all of them were now either safely hidden behind the castle walls... or dead.

It was just the seven of them. They came to see Kai off.

The charming archer was standing near the edge of the roof, checking his equipment for the last time. He was wearing a new stylish armor and a leather jacket with fur on its collar. On his back, there was a quiver full of arrows and a backpack with water, food, and other supplies necessary for a long journey.

Sunny didn't know about the rest, but his heart was heavy.

As though reading his thoughts, Kai turned around and smiled.

"Really, guys, don't worry. I'll be fine. This is not my first time spending some quality time in the Labyrinth."

No one answered, knowing that the mission entrusted to Nightingale this time was especially dangerous... but also important.

He had to leave the Dark City and explore the vastness of the Forgotten Shore in search of new humans sent here by the Spell.

Today was the day of the winter solstice, and that meant that out there in the real world, thousands upon thousands of Sleepers were currently preparing to enter the pods and arrive in the Dream Realm.

Sunny sighed.

"Just don't bring back anyone as irritating as you, alright?"

Kai chuckled.

"...No promises."

With that, he waved them goodbye.

"Well... wish me luck!"

A few moments later, he was gone, turning into a small dot in the sky.

The remaining six people stared at it for a long time, their faces somber.

Their future depended on what Kai would discover.

Their and that of everyone else still clinging to life on the Forgotten Shore.

Chapter 311: The Last | Shadow Slave

A few days passed in tense anticipation. Sunny spent them doing the same things he had been doing before: training and preparing mentally for what was about to come.

He had a lot of things to do.

First came his technique, which was based on the flowing battle style that Nephis had taught him, with elements of Shadow Saint's grounded style added to its adaptive foundation. His skill was growing sharper and sharper, slowly being elevated and solidified at the level that his current understanding of combat allowed.

Sunny was not a novice anymore. He survived hundreds of deadly battles, and each left him stronger and more experienced than he had been before.

But perfecting his technique was still not easy, because he had to make himself indomitable first, and then turn that firmness into flexibility.

Now that Sunny finally had free time, he also used it to adapt his style to the new reality of his improved physical limits. Many things that had not been possible for him before the journey to the Hollow Mountains became possible now. The way he approached combat had to change, too.

All of it took effort and a lot of thought to achieve.

Second came the Shadow Dance. Sunny was still at the stage where he was slowly forming a practical set of moves to train in that elusive style. He felt as if he was now only one final step away from turning his vision of the Shadow Dance into reality. However, he seemed to be lacking some crucial ingredient. He needed one last push, one moment of inspiration to make that final step.

Still, his exercises weren't useless. Until that moment of inspiration came, they helped condition his body and mind, make them adaptable and

malleable like shadows. When the last revelation appeared, they would be able to receive it.

After each intense training session, every muscle in his body ached, and a wave of mental fatigue washed over him.

Third came the most important task. He had to turn his mind and soul into a fortress that would withstand the shock of the future.

He had to achieve the type of clarity that would allow him to emerge victorious on the other end of it all, and for now, this task was turning out to be the most unattainable.

It was hard to shape one's body and mind into a perfect tool, but it was so much harder to do the same with one's soul. However, this was exactly the barrier he had to overcome.

Just like that, six days passed.

...On the seventh day after his departure, Kai finally returned. The charming young man seemed tired and ragged, his armor and clothes covered in dirt, dust, and dried blood. The quiver of arrows he had taken with him was now empty, and there were shallow cuts on the fabric of his jacket.

Sunny's shadow had kept watching the skies above the Bright Castle all this time, so he was one of the first to know.

By the time Sunny arrived at the small room that served as Neph's council chamber, Kai was already there, sitting by the fire and greedily drinking water from a crude clay cup. Effie was by his side, pushing a plate of food into his hands.

Noticing him, Kai smiled weakly.

"Hey, Sunny."

Sunny hesitated for a bit, then approached the beautiful young man and patted him on the shoulder.

"Hey, Kai. Welcome back."

Neither he nor Effie spoke after than, giving their friend an opportunity to catch his breath and waiting for the rest to come.

One after another, Cassie, Caster, and Seishan appeared in the room and greeted Kai. Nephis was the last to enter.

She glanced at everyone and then sat down near Kai. After hesitating for a few moments, she looked him in the eyes and asked:

"How many?"

Kai remained silent for a while, a solemn expression slowly appearing in his eyes. Finally, he turned away and sighed. One word escaped his lips:

"...None."

His voice echoed in the small room, making the faces of people gathered there darken.

"I scoured the Labyrinth, looking for any sign that a Sleeper passed there recently. But there were none. There was no one alive and no bodies, not even a single fresh bone that I could find. The Spell... it did not send anyone to this hell, not this year."

'And it won't the next one, too. Just as I thought.'

Sunny sighed. Sometimes, it was nice to be mistaken.

Fifteen years ago, the Spell had sent seven people to the Forgotten Shore. The next year, it had been twice as much, and then more and more. Eventually, hundreds of Sleepers had been arriving in the Dark City after each winter solstice... up until last year, when only four of them — Sunny, Nephis, Cassie, and Caster — had come.

Three more had perished in the Labyrinth without ever reaching the cursed ruins.

Because of that, inhabitants of the Bright Castle came up with a theory that the number of people sent to this region of the Dream Realm by the Spell followed a certain cycle. If they had been right, then at least fourteen Sleepers would have appeared somewhere in the Labyrinth a week ago.

But Sunny never believed in that theory.

In his mind, the four of them had never been meant to start a new cycle. He had always thought that, instead, they were meant to be the last.

The last chance the Spell had given to the people of the Forgotten Shore.

And now, he knew that he had been right.

With a sigh, Nephis slowly nodded and stared at the fire burning in the hearth for a bit. Everyone stood silently, waiting for her to make a decision.

Finally, she said without looking at them:

"...Tell everyone to gather in the throne room. I will speak to them."

Without wasting any time, Caster bowed slightly and left the room. Effie gave her a short look, and then followed him. So did the rest.

Sunny was the last one to leave, his heart beating like a drum.

'It is beginning!'

Chapter 312: Invisible Chains | Shadow Slave

Five hundred people stood silently in the magnificent great hall of the ancient castle. Beams of sunlight were falling through the tall windows, making the air appear bright and effervescent.

There was no sign left of the terrible bloodshed that had happened in this hall just a few weeks ago. The bodies were dragged away, the blood washed off the marble floors.

But the memory of it remained.

On the steps leading to a beautiful throne of white marble sat a young woman with silver hair. Her ivory face was distant, and her clear grey eyes were calm and heavy. Hundreds of people were looking at her, waiting quietly for their lady to speak.

Finally, Changing Star sighed. A moment later, her voice resounded in the throne room, reaching far and wide:

"Dreamers of the Forgotten Shore. A week ago, I sent several scouts into the Labyrinth to look for those young men and women who, like us, were sent to this cursed place. Among them was Nightingale, whom you all know. He spent seven days searching for them. But he didn't find anyone. Not even a single sign of their passing. This year... no one has come."

A wave of stunned whispers ran through the crowd. Sunny glanced at the faces of people gathered in the great hall, noticing different expressions on them. Confusion, fear, shock. However, it wasn't as bad as he had expected. No one seemed to become consumed by utter despair.

Instead, all of them turned to Nephis, hope burning in their eyes.

She was their hope. Until Changing Star was with them, they weren't going to give in to despair.

Indifferent to hundreds of eyes observing her every move, Neph continued:

"Many of you understand what that means. To those who don't, I will explain."

She lingered for a moment, throwing a glance at the walls of the ancient citadel. When she spoke, her voice seemed solemn:

"For many years, this castle served as a fortress for the humans sent to the Forgotten Shore. Some of you enjoyed the safety it offered, while others survived in the shadow of its walls. But none of us would have been here if not for the Bright Castle. It offered us protection against the dreadful beasts of the Dark City. It offered us shelter. However, this shelter was never free."

A dark expression appeared on her face.

"Some people lost their souls to preserve it. And many more lost their lives. Every year, hundreds of human lives were sacrificed to allow the Bright Castle to exist. And every year, hundreds more came to be thrown into its maw."

Sunny silently scoffed. She was making it sound as though the Castle was some creature that fed on human lives... not unlike the Soul Devourer, really. The meaning was subtle enough to not be obvious, but still affect the people gathered in the throne room. Observing them, he saw many Sleepers shiver and frown.

'...Insidious.'

Meanwhile, Nephis continued:

"But no more. There won't be anyone coming to the Dark City this year, just like no one will come after that. Without new people, the losses we suffer will slowly accumulate, until there is no one to man the walls, no one to fight off the Nightmare Creatures, no one to keep these halls safe. Until there is no more shelter. This end..."

She made a pause, and then said calmly and with frightening finality:

"...is inevitable."

Her words crashed into the crowd of Sleepers, causing a storm of emotions. Their eyes widened and their faces paled. The shock and fear they had felt grew tenfold.

As if to hammer the last nail into the coffin of their worldview, Changing Star said:

"Which means only one thing. We cannot remain in the Bright Castle anymore."

Screams rose from the crowd, full of disbelief and terror. There were many things people were trying to say, but they all boiled down to three:

"What do we do?!"

"How do we save ourselves?!"

...And:

"Save us, Changing Star!"

Sunny smiled.

Nephis remained silent for a while, letting the chorus of screams wash over her. And then, white flames ignited in her eyes, making everyone fall silent. Her voice resounded once more between the walls of the great hall, penetrating through the crowd like a sharp blade:

"But this not the end of us. A long time ago, I made you a promise. And I intend to keep it."

She suddenly rose, towering over the crowd like a shining, ruinous angel.

"Come with me! Follow me. Only I know how to save you."

The radiance of her flames reflected in the eyes of hundreds of people, making it seem as though their faces shone with an inner light. Her words had submerged them into utter darkness, and then gave them a beacon to find a way out of it.

That beacon burned with the most seductive of lights.

The light of hope.

And that hope was synonymous with her.

Changing Star slowly descended from the steps, her words echoing from the marble walls of the throne room:

"Follow me, and I will lead you out of this hell. Follow me, and I will show you the path back to your homes. But make no mistake..."

She stopped and remained silent for a few long moments. When she spoke again, her voice sounded calmer, colder...

Heavier.

"The road ahead will be long and arduous. Not everyone will make it. The weak will die. The strong will die, too. And those who remain won't be the same. But there is one thing I can promise you..."

Nephis entered the crowd and looked at the people surrounding her with absolute resolve burning in her beautiful eyes.

"Follow me... and you will never be slaves."

Sunny shivered, feeling as though she was speaking to him alone. Everyone in the great hall felt the same way, perhaps.

Staring directly into their souls, Changing Star spoke:

"...Slaves to your fear, slaves to your fate, slaves to the Nightmare Spell. Come with me, and whether you live or die, you will do so humans. Not cowering beasts."

She closed her eyes and exhaled, then looked down. Finally, she said, the passion disappearing from her voice:

"But... I will not force anyone to follow me. Ever. Whether you come with me or stay, it is your choice. There is no shame in staying. Those who do not wish to go may leave this hall right now."

Sunny looked at the Sleepers, trying to guess what their reaction would be. People were staring at each other, doubt and fear written on their faces.

Not everyone was enthralled by Changing Star. Not everyone was brave and strong. Not everyone was ready to die fighting.

...But in the end, not a single one of them left.

Nephis sighed and slowly turned her head west, as though trying to pierce the stone of the castle walls with her gaze. After a while, she said:

"Good. I am glad. Then it's decided."

She turned to face them, furious white flames illuminating her pale face:

"Then the day after tomorrow... we will leave the Bright Castle. The day after tomorrow, we march on the Crimson Spire!"

Chapter 313: Starlight Shard | Shadow Slave

On the last day they would spend in the Dark City, Nephis led a small group of her most powerful warriors on one last hunt.

The members of her cohort were all following behind her. Sunny, who stubbornly refused to accept his status as one of them, walked apart from the group, idly looking around and observing the ruins.

Gemma and Seishan were also with them, as well as ten or so of the most experienced hunters — some of them formerly from the Host, some formerly from the outer settlement. There was no difference between the two anymore.

All of them were simply Changing Star's people now.

As they were walking, Gemma approached Sunny and glanced at him with curiosity.

After Tessai had fallen to Neph's blade, the tall man seemed to have found some measure of peace. Somewhere deep in his eyes, however, there always was a hint of sorrow.

Sunny stared at him and raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

The hunter smiled slightly and asked in a friendly tone:

"You're Sunless, right?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Yeah, that's me."

Gemma silently measured him and then asked with interest:

"I've heard that you lived for months alone in the city. Is that true?"

'Ah, makes sense.'

The tall man was perhaps the most experienced hunter on the Forgotten Shore. He had survived countless battles on the streets of the cursed city. It was natural for him to be curious about this matter...

Sunny gave him a nod.

"Sure. A little over three months, I guess."

Gemma rubbed his chin, then asked bluntly:

"How did you survive?"

Sunny grinned.

How had he managed that, indeed?

"...Lots of hiding, lots of killing. A modicum of madness, and a little bit of luck."

Gemma stared at him for a bit, then chuckled.

"Sound about right, I guess."

After a while, he glanced forward at Changing Star and asked in a curious tone:

"Do you know what we are going to hunt today?"

Sunny looked at him with surprise:

"She didn't tell you?"

The tall man hesitated, then shook his head.

"She did. I'm just not sure that I believe it."

Sunny smiled and looked away.

"Ah, let me guess. Your first thought was that she had lost her mind. What can I say... get used to that feeling."

After a few moments of silence, Gemma sighed.

"But how can we kill it?"

'Poor guy...'

Sunny glanced at him, lingered for a bit, and then said:

"If my guess is correct, you know more about it than I do."

And just like that, their conversation ended.

By the middle of the day, they reached the eastern edges of the city and climbed the imposing monolith of the great wall. Standing on top of it, they saw the colossal crater and the headless statue that stood not too far away, its one remaining hand thrust toward the skies.

Their prey was hiding in a vast underground chamber beneath that statue.

Today, they were going to hunt the Lord of the Dead.

At the base of the statue, the second arm of the Priestess lay in the mud. Thousands of years ago, it had broken off and fell, crashing through the dome of the underground chamber. Now, there was a chasm in the ground that led into the lair of the Lord of the Dead.

Many months ago, Sunny and the rest had used that breach to escape from the catacombs. Now, they were going to use it to descend into that darkness, instead.

The ghastly master of the catacombs waited for them below. Sunny wasn't really surprised that Nephis had chosen to return to this place. After all, the

mountainous abomination was most likely guarding the last of the seven Shard Memories.

However, he was really curious about how exactly she was planning to kill it.

Once everyone gathered around the hole in the mud, Changing Star glanced at him and said:

"Sunny, can your shadow take a look at the burial chamber?"

With a shrug, he sent the shadow into the breach. It slid on the mud and entered the dark hole, then hid in the palm of the giant stone hand and cautiously looked down.

The mountain of human bones was still there, in the middle of the vast circular chamber.

However, it looked very different from how it had been before.

Countless green vines were growing from the mass of bones, some of them comparatively thin, others as thick as a human body. They weren't growing just between the ancient remains: the vines were bursting through the bones, too. Almost as if feeding on them.

The Lord of the Dead seemed... weaker. More brittle. As though it was sick, sapped of its strength and infected by a terrible parasite.

Sunny commanded his shadow to look closer, and finally noticed the thing that he had expected to see.

A small wooden box lay on the floor of the underground chamber, open and empty. The exact same box Nephis had mysteriously entrusted to Caster as soon as they were back in the Dark City.

From the words the outer settlement hunter, that box had appeared on his pillow with a small note. That note had been written by Changing Star's spy — Seishan. And the contents of the box had been created for her by Kido, who was now dead.

Kido had been the leader of the Artisans. Her Aspect Ability allowed her to control and alter plants.

This bone-eating vine, as it turned out, was her last creation and final masterpiece.

Turning to Nephis, Sunny hesitated for a moment and then spoke, his words causing a subtle reaction in Gemma:

"The tyrant is heavily infected by Kido's vine. It seems to be considerably weakened."

Changing Star nodded and remained silent for a few moments. Then, she said:

"Once we enter the chamber, the Lord of the Dead will attack us. Now that its power is reduced, and with the help of the Dawn Shard, we should be able to survive the onslaught. We should also be able to wound, and eventually kill it."

Looking at the faces of everyone gathered in the shadow of the headless statue, she nodded and headed toward the breach.

"Let's go."

Soon, Sunny was trying to survive the fury of the Lord of the Dead once again. But this time, it was not as hard as it had been before.

He had become stronger, and the horrible creature had become weaker. His Memories were augmented by the Crown of Dawn, and Saint was now a demon.

There were also more humans resisting the tyrant today.

... That was not to say that the battle wasn't harrowing and perilous. In fact, it was utterly lethal.

The humans fighting the monumental Nightmare Creature were surrounding it, dodging the long limbs of the tyrant and trying to attack it when an opportunity presented itself. Kai was zipping in the air, providing support and bringing the wounded away from the fight.

They were only alive because the attacks of the Lord of the Dead were now slower and less devastating than before. With some preparation, both Effie and Saint could withstand one or two with the help of their shields. Caster was able to deliver several cuts to it with its ghostly blade, while Seishan had broken one limb completely with her graceful war hammer.

Each strike of the Sunlight Shard seemed to bring immense pain to the Lord of the Dead.

But nothing hurt it more, of course, than the incandescent blade of Changing Star.

Together, they dealt more and more damage to the terrible creature, despite the fact that many of them were now either severely wounded or dead. The tyrant was being consumed from within by the green vines, and broken from the outside by their weapons.

And then, after a long and arduous battle, a huge lair of bones fell from the body of the Lord of the Dead, revealing its inner core.

That core, which was made of human skulls and coagulated blood, was absolutely terrifying, malignant, and abhorrent. In its death, a shape of a fat white maggot could be seen, curled into a ball.

At that moment, Effie suddenly stepped forward, twisted her body... and threw the Dusk Shard as a discus with a deafening cry.

The shield that was said to contain the weight of the heavens streaked through the air with terrible speed and hit the inner core of the tyrant, crushing through it like a wrecking ball. It cut the maggot in half and exited the body of the Lord of the Dead from the other side in a torrent of broken bones. Then it fell to the ground, shattering the stone floor of the chamber and sending a net of cracks running through it from the point of impact.

The mountain of bones froze, the shuddered.

And then, it crumbled.

Everyone stared at Effie, shocked, hope burning in their eyes.

On her face, there was a dark, mournful expression. Belatedly, Sunny remembered that the members of the original cohort that the boisterous huntress had belonged to all perished here, killed either by the undead army or the Lord of the Dead itself.

A few moments later, Effie sighed and turned her face away, hiding it from everyone. Then, she raised a hand and made it into a fist.

That was her letting them know that she had received a Memory from the kill.

A Shard Memory.

The last one there was.

Chapter 314: Leaving the Dark City

After everything was done and Nephis used her flames to heal those who survived, they returned to the city through the catacombs.

Perhaps she wished to eviscerate the army of undead monsters that were now left without the tyrant to bring them back to life. But in the end, they were met with nothing but silence.

The horde of ferocious skeletons that had once almost cost Sunny and the rest of the cohort their lives was no more. The dark tunnels stretching beneath the ruins were littered with piles of bones, which were slowly turning into dust. It seemed as though the moment the Lord of the Dead had been destroyed, its servants had perished, too.

After a while, the group of humans emerged from the collapsed tower of the lighthouse and continued on its way back to the Bright Castle.

They were going to spend their last night there before leaving the Dark City behind.

In a small room in the depths of the ancient citadel, seven people gathered around a table.

They were Sunny, Nephis, Cassie, Caster, Effie, Kai, and Seishan.

Beyond the walls of the castle, the absolute darkness of the night had devoured the world. Nightmare Creatures were prowling the cursed ruins, and somewhere far away, black waves were crashing against the indomitable granite surface of the city wall.

Inside, the cold light of a Memory lantern illuminated their faces.

Strangely, everyone was silent, as though not sure what to say. Finally, Sunny broke the silence by yawning loudly.

"Shall we get on with this? Tomorrow is going to be a long day, and some of us need their beauty sleep."

He threw a sideways glance at Kai, thought for a bit, and then added:

"Actually, every day after today is going to be a long one. So let's just do it."

Nephis stared at him for a few moments, then echoed his words:

"...Do it."

With that, they summoned their Memories.

An austere tachi and a ghostly stiletto appeared in Sunny's hands.

A graceful war hammer with a narrow beak appeared in Seishan's.

Effie summoned her beautiful bronze spear and a heavy round shield.

Finally, a simple band of metal decorated with a single gem weaved itself from light and rested gently on Changing Star's head.

They were the Shard Memories.

Dawn, Zenith, Dusk, Midnight, Sunlight, Moonlight...

...And Starlight.

The last Memory was a short, flowing white cloak that draped itself around Effie's shoulders. This was the Shard she had received after slaying the Lord of the Dead.

For a few moments, no one moved. Then, Effie said:

"So, uh... what now?"

Nephis tilted her head a little, then frowned. Finally, after some time passed, she said:

"Come closer."

When they did, something unexpected happened. Sunny felt the hilts of his weapons suddenly growing hotter, and soon, both Midnight and Moonlight Shard began emanating a ghostly, ethereal light. The same was happening to the other shards.

Seven beams of light shot toward the center of the room and collided. Then, they fused with each other, and soon, seven objects weaved themselves from that light and hovered in the air.

They were keys forged out of lustrous metal, with seven shining stars engraved on their surface.

It was the manifestation of the terrible oath that the seven heroes had given all those thousands of years ago. The keys that were used to seal the curse of the all-consuming darkness underground.

Suddenly, the seven keys turned into streams of light and shot toward each of the seven people gathered in the room.

One beam hit Sunny in the chest and disappeared, absorbed into his core.

The voice of the Spell resounded in his ears:

[...You have received an Oath Key.]

Sunny shivered. He didn't want anything to do with that morbid oath.

...But in the end, he had no other choice.

Glancing at the rest of the people gathered in the room, Changing Star lingered for a moment, and then said:

"We're ready."

In the dim light of dawn, the gates of the castle opened for the last time. A long procession of humans walked through them, leaving the ancient citadel that had sheltered them for so long.

They walked under the swinging skulls, not paying them any attention. In the aftermath of all the strife, no one had bothered to remove the ghastly things from their chains.

It was not like anyone could have forgotten the hundreds of lives lost in the struggle, and thousands of deaths before that, even if the skulls were removed.

Five hundred people descended the hill and entered the Dark City. A few Nightmare Creatures tried to attack them, and were eviscerated before managing to do any harm.

These five hundred humans were not a defenseless crowd. They were a battle-hardened army, one comprised of exceptionally powerful Sleepers... the most powerful Sleepers to ever be born from the human race, perhaps.

They moved the ruins, cutting down anything that dared to block their path. Soon, the Sleepers approached the western boundary of the Dark City and scaled the ancient wall.

There, they stopped and turned, staring at the silhouette of the Bright Castle in solemn silence.

...By then, pillars of black smoke were billowing from each of its windows. Soon, the whole castle was enveloped by furious flames, which slowly devoured the white stone of its walls. The magnificent marble cracked and melted, destroyed by the terrible heat. The smaller towers swayed and moved, and then fell into the terrible crucible.

The fire was slowly destroying the Bright Castle, turning it into a molten ruin.

In a sense, this was fitting. After all, everything else in the Dark City had been ruined a long, long time ago.

Surprisingly, this act of destruction was not Changing Star's idea. She wasn't the one who ordered to burn the Bright Castle behind them, like a final gesture to hammer it into everyone's souls that there was no way back anymore. Sunny would have expected something like that from Nephis.

But no, it was the decision of the people themselves.

They wanted to destroy the ancient citadel, because they hated it. They hated these ancient, bloodsoaked stones only a little bit less than they needed them to survive.

And now that they were leaving, they wanted to erase the Bright Castle from existence. Perhaps if it was gone, the memories of all the darkness that they had witnessed there, and were the perpetrators of, would disappear with it.

After a while, the misshapen, twisted silhouette of the dying fortress was completely hidden by the fire and smoke. Slowly, the silent Sleepers turned away from that sight and looked far away into the distance.

They were looking west.

That was where they were going.

To lay siege to the Crimson Spire.

One after another, the Sleepers descended from the wall and left the Dark City behind.

Chapter 315: Siege of the Crimson Spire (1)

In the cold light of dawn, a gargantuan crimson tower was rising from the Labyrinth. From this distance, it looked like a bloodied sword that some primordial titan had thrust into the heavens.

The crimson coral streamed from its walls like the blood of gods, spreading out from the base of the Spire to devour all of the Forgotten Shore. The tower itself seemed to stand on an island, which was surrounded from all sides by black water. Even though the sun was already climbing up, this part of the cursed sea did not disappear.

Instead, it lingered and moved endlessly, forming a giant whirlpool. Unclear shapes could be seen moving under the surface of the black water, drowning the hearts of humans who dared to approach the Spire with dread.

Sunny looked up, at the endless expanse of the crimson tower, and paled. Upclose, it looked even more ominous, oppressive, and terrifying. He struggled to believe that this cyclopean structure had been built by human hands, let alone that it had been their salvation once, a long time ago.

Now, the Crimson Spire looked nothing but twisted, eerie, and utterly evil. It emanated a sense of harrowing power that no human could ever hope to challenge.

And yet, this was exactly what they were going to do.

Turning away, he glanced at the camp of the Dreamer Army.

For the past week, the five hundred of them had traversed the Labyrinth to reach this place. Some had perished along the way, but not as many as he had expected. For that short journey, luck had been on their side.

In these days, they had slaughtered countless Nightmare Creatures and somehow managed to avoid attracting the wrath of the dwellers of the deep. They had seen the headless statue of the Lord that stood halfway between

the Dark City and the Crimson Spire, and many other wondrous and terrible things.

And now, they had almost reached their goal.

People were busy preparing for the battle. The dread they had felt at dawn, after looking at the Crimson Spire, which was now so close, turned into grim determination and resolve. Everyone was making final preparations. Some were checking their armor and weapons for the last time. Some were hurriedly building makeshift fortifications.

Some were praying, begging the dead gods to save their lives.

Truth be told, Sunny was the only person who appeared to be idle.

Well, what did they expect? Nephis still had not told him what exactly his role in the battle was going to be. Not that he was obligated to listen, of course...

With a sigh, he turned to the other members of the cohort, who were gathered around a fire, discussing the plan of the battle for the hundredth time. Everyone seemed uncharacteristically somber today.

One after another, they left to join in the preparations. Soon, Changing Star was the only one left.

With a bit of reluctance, Sunny approached her and sat down, staring at the fire. After a while, he said:

"This is very strange, don't you think?"

She glanced at him and raised an eyebrow.

Nephis had changed a lot since the first time they met, but also remained exactly the same. She was still calm and confident, with ivory skin and beautiful silver hair. She was still strong and full of conviction.

It's just that her eyes seemed a bit hollow these days.

"What is?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Just... all of it. If someone described this scene to me a year ago, I would have been really perplexed. And yet, here we are."

He lingered for a bit, and then added:

"We've come very far. The three of us."

Both of them glanced at Cassie, who was busy explaining something to the Artisan representatives. Her delicate hand rested on the hilt of the Quiet Dancer.

After a while, Nephis nodded.

"Yes. And now, we just need to make one last step."

Both of them remained silent for a bit, thinking about how this final step was going to be the hardest yet. Incomparably so...

Then, Sunny sighed:

"So, what do you want me to do? From how you kept avoiding the subject for these past days, I'm guessing that it's not something trivial."

Changing Star smiled, then looked at him with white sparks dancing in her eyes.

"A really small thing, really."

Then, she turned to face the Crimson Spire, hesitated for a while, and then suddenly said:

"...Give me your hand."

When Sunny did, something traveled through her cool skin into his Shadow Core. He summoned the runes and looked at them, already knowing what

he was going to see. And there it was, listed among his Memories:

Oath Key: [7].

Somehow, she had gathered the remaining six keys from the rest. And now, she was entrusting them to Sunny.

Still looking at the cyclopean tower, Nephis said:

"...I want you to destroy the dark sea. Or banish it, at least."

Sunny grinned.

"A really small thing, indeed."

Very soon, the sun rose higher, and the dark whirlpool surrounding the Crimson Spire became a little smaller. Several bridges of red coral rose from its depths, connecting the island to the rest of the Forgotten Shore.

And out there on the island, countless silhouettes suddenly began to move, crawling out of the crimson mounds. They were the Nightmare Creatures guarding the cursed tower.

All kinds of horrors were among them. There were members of the carapace legion: scavengers, centurions, and demons. There were colonies of carnivorous worms, giant centipedes that secreted corrosive oil, and eerie vines that crawled on the ground like snakes.

There were creatures that looked like black masses of rotten bones, and creatures that looked like humanoids made of rock, with terrible maws full of jagged fangs. There were swarms of translucent insects that devoured everything in their path and massive spiders clad in iron armor.

There were beasts that could shoot deadly bone spears from their bodies and beasts that could turn their prey to stone with their gaze.

There were corpses with red flowers growing from the holes in their flesh and giant abominations that resembled praying mantises, if those were made of glass and bloodred clay.

And many more that Sunny had never seen, fought, or could describe.

All of them moved together in strange harmony, devoid of the usual territorial aggression that forced the Nightmare Creatures of different tribes to fight each other. They were subjugated by the Crimson Terror and now served to guard the Spire.

Like a terrible wave, the horde of monsters rolled over the bridges of crimson coral and flowed toward the human army.

From his position at the back of it, Sunny could clearly see the bodies of those standing in the front line tremble and take an involuntary step back. Someone even dropped their weapon. A moment later, Effie's loud voice rolled over the rows of Sleepers:

"Stand your ground, wretches! If anyone runs, I'll kill you myself!"

Strangely, her irritated shout calmed down the fear in their hearts.

A moment later, however, it was drowned in the cacophony of the approaching horde.

...The battle for the Crimson Spire had begun.

Chapter 316: Siege of the Crimson Spire (2)

On the outskirts of the Crimson Spire, there were no more passages and tunnels in the coral. It was just a solid red mass, an unbroken surface of the strange living substance that had devoured the Forgotten Shore thousands of years ago.

Currently, Effie was standing on that surface.

Several hundred people were standing beside her, staring at the approaching wave of Nightmare Creatures with horror and shock. All of them knew what was going to happen once they reached the Spire, but even then, the sight of it was terrifying.

She was at the center of the front row of these frightened people, supposedly in command of them. With her tall stature and lean, powerful figure, Effie stood out among the rest of the Sleepers. Her archaic armor glistened in the light of the rising sun, and on her shouldered, there was a flowing white cloak weaved from starlight.

She held Zenith in one hand and Dusk in the other.

Effie seemed like a bastion of strength and resolve in the sea of fear. A mythical hero that had stepped into the mortal realm from an ancient legend.

...But really, she was scared shitless.

Looking at the rolling horde of abominable horrors with a grim expression, the huntress lowered her head a little and summoned the helm of her armor, which was crowned with a tall crest of blue horsehair, and thought:

'Fuck me sideways... fuck, fuck, fuck!'

All around her, people were trembling. Some fool dropped his weapon and took a few steps back, as if considering running away. Even though she was currently seriously thinking of doing the same, Effie snarled and bellowed:

"Stand your ground, wretches! If anyone runs, I'll kill you myself!"

...What was the point of running, anyway? There was nowhere to run.

If they were going to die, they might as well die like humans.

Just like Princess had said. She was somewhat full of shit, but also never wrong.

"Get ready, bastards!"

Gripping her spear, Effie cast a sideways glance at the two men standing beside her. One of them was Caster, and the other one was Gemma. Who would have thought that one day she and the leader of Gunlaug's Hunters were going to fight side by side?

Weirdly, the presence of her past enemy was now extremely reassuring. However, even on his face, there were hints of fear.

The only person who could have stayed nonchalant in this situation was probably Doofus. That pale miscreant was either too crazy or too stupid... or both... to be scared of anything. But he was currently nowhere to be seen. Effie sort of missed the tiny menace.

But Sunny was probably either hiding someplace dark or doing something too insane to be entrusted to anyone else. In any case, she wished him luck.

She wished herself luck, too.

Looking at the approaching horde of monsters, Effie waited for a few seconds, and then screamed:

"First mark!"

Her shout was repeated by Seishan, who commanded the second line, and reached Night somewhere in the third.

The plan of the battle was really simple. The first line had to hold off the monsters, changing places with the second once they grew tired.

Meanwhile, the third was in charge of eviscerating as many creatures as they could.

But first, they had to withstand the initial charge. Nothing was more important than breaking the momentum of the attacking horde.

Somewhere behind her, the enchanting voice of their resident idol gave the command to fire the siege engines. These monstrous machines were constructed by the Artisans and were supposed to be able to pierce the armor of the most heavily protected Nightmare Creatures. As long as they were not Fallen, of course...

A strange and melodic sound reached her ears, and a fraction of a second later, six heavy metal spears, each at least two meters long, flew above their heads with incredible speed. They streaked through the air and collided with the front of the horde, sending bits of chitin and streams of blood to the ground.

She saw one of them behead a giant crab-like creature, the other pierce right through a bloodred mantis and skewer several monsters behind it. But the wave of horrors did not slow down one bit. There was just so many of them...

Feeling a shiver run through her body, Effie gritted her teeth, then shouted:

"Second mark!"

Almost immediately, a rain of arrows fell on the monsters, wounding many and killing a few. There were many other projectiles mixed in with the arrows. Some Sleepers used slings, crossbows, or more exotic projectile weapons. Some used their Aspect Abilities, which allowed them to create all sorts of sorcerous attacks, like flying blades made of wind, fire, and ice. Some could even create bombs filled with soul essence, which detonated in the midst of advancing horrors and ripped many apart.

But still, no reaction. The monsters only seemed to become more frenzied, the fury, madness, and bloodlust in their eyes flashing even brighter.

The second rain of arrows fell, and shortly after, six more spear shot from makeshift ballistae crashed into the horde. By then, the Nightmare Creatures were already too close to the front line of humans to change anything.

Making a step forward, Effie strained her muscles and threw the Zenith Shard into the approaching mass of abominations. The beautiful bronze spear shattered the steel carapace of an especially tall creature and pierced its heart.

How could it not kill, empowered by the miraculous enchantment of the Crown of Dawn? All of their weapons, and all of their armors, were currently being fed raw power by Changing Star.

All around the steel demon, numerous abominations fell, killed in a similar fashion by the Memories thrown by the other Sleepers.

Summoning the spear back, Effie watched as the first row of Nightmare Creatures fell into a deep ditch that the Artisans created just an hour earlier. Those moving behind them simply stepped on the bodies of their fellow abominations and continued moving forward.

But finally, the speed of the horde was diminished, if only by a little.

'Damn thi...'

"Brace!"

That's all she had time to yell before the wave of monsters crashed into the line of humans.

Then, the world was consumed by nothing but madness, havoc, and death.

Chapter 317: Siege of the Crimson Spire (3)

Putting her weight behind the Dusk Shard, Effie leaned into the shield and gritted her teeth. A moment later, a monstrous blow landed on it, strong enough to crush stone into dust.

But unlike Sunny's marvelous Echo, she was not made out of stone.

Instead, Effie was made out of something far more resilient.

"Argh!"

Pushing with all her strength, she felt the shockwave of the impact run through her entire body and then dissipate into the ground. Her bones groaned, but held together. Despite the terrible pressure, she held, too.

A moment later, Effie growled and pushed even harder, throwing the carapace centurion that had crashed into her a couple of centimeters back. Simultaneously, her spear shot from behind the shield and pierced the black chitin, sinking deep into the flesh of the monster. She twisted it and severed the creature's spine, then slammed her shoulder into the Dusk Shard, sending the massive corpse flying off the bronze blade.

Just in time. A second later, and the tall bastard would have skewered her with one of its scythes from above.

But as soon as the centurion fell to the ground, another abomination was already taking its place, with a terrible salivating maw and furious eyes that burned with madness.

'Curse it all...'

All around Effie, the bodies of humans and Nightmare Creatures were entangled into an undulating, bleeding, roaring mess. Claws and steel weapons rose and fell, sending streams of blood, splinters of bone, and chunks of flesh to the ground. Screams of fear, pain, and fury mixed with

the indescribable howling of the nightmare horde into a cacophonous litany of death.

In this split second, she noticed one of her fellow hunters throwing the body of an iron spider that had jumped onto him back with a thunderous strike of his shield; a stone golem biting into someone's head with its terrible jagged fangs; a giant centipede wrapping its long segmented body around a screaming human and sinking its hundred legs into his melting armor.

Then, she had no more time to stare.

"Hold! Hold, you misbegotten waifs!"

Taking a step forward, she dodged a harrowing slash of a three-meter tall mantis-like creature's scythe and brought the edge of her shield on the leg of the abominable thing. The thin limb practically exploded, sending the monster crashing down — right on the blade of her spear, which flew upward and turned the head of the mantis into a red smudge.

Before the creature even fell to the ground, Effie had already spun, receiving a rain of blows on her heavy shield. Her spear lashed out from behind it, piercing the body of the attacker through the heart.

'Blood Flower...'

Effie held her breath and kicked the rotting primate in the chest, sending it flying back before too much of the damned pollen escaped the wound. The body of the Blood Flower host collided with another monster and exploded into bloody chunks from the force of the impact.

[You have slain...]

Noticing a shadow move to her right, Effie turned and thrust her spear forward. But at the last moment, she pulled it back. The point of the bronze blade stopped just a few centimeters away from another human's face.

For a fraction of the second, they stared at each other — Effie with confusion, the vaguely familiar young man with belated fear. Then, a

massive shadow moved behind him, and the youth's head suddenly separated from his shoulders in a stream of blood, cut off cleanly with one slash of a metal demon's blade.

'...D—damn!'

Effie looked up at the terrible creature. But before she had time to react, something crashed into her from the side, sending a wave of pain through her body. With a grunt, she slid on the bloodied coral and twisted her torso to put Dusk Shard between herself and the attacker.

A quick glance let Effie know that her armor was still intact, even if just barely. The point of impact was covered with seething acid, which was biting into the metal, trying to burn through it. Thanks to the enhancement of the Dawn Shard, however, the breastplate remained unscathed.

She shifted her weight, preparing to deflect the next attack of the giant centipede. Before Effie could, though, something heavy landed on her back, trying to sink its teeth into her neck. She felt drops of blood streaming to her chest.

A furious growl escaped from her mouth.

Throwing the Zenith Shard into the maw of the charging centipede and practically severing the body of the creature down its length, she stretched her freed hand back, caught the monster that was trying to bite her head off, and through it to the ground.

The body of the abomination hit with enough force to make the coral crack. Just to make sure that the bastard was dead, she stomped on it with her foot, shattering the head of the damn thing into tiny pieces.

But as soon as she did, four more were already around her, their sharp claws and fangs lusting to taste her blood.

Bringing the Dusk Shard down on one of them, Effie grinned, then twisted and summoned her spear back.

With blood streaming from her wounded neck, she dodged a powerful claw and laughed:

"Bastards! Are you... trying to eat... me?! Ha-ha-ha... let's see who's gonna eat who, fools!"

All around her, the first line of the Dreamer Army was slowly buckling under the pressure of the nightmare horde. So many of them were already dead, and more were dying every second. Their bodies were torn to pieces and devoured, disappearing into the mass of monsters like morning dew. That sight was so harrowing and chilling that the mind simply refused to process it.

And yet, the Sleepers of the first line — those who possessed the most powerful combat Aspects and the best Memories — had achieved their goal. They stopped the devastating wave of abominations in its tracks and tied it down with their blades and their lives.

The horde failed to roll over the human army, obliterating it completely without even slowing down.

More than that, the massacre was not one-sided. For every human killed, several Nightmare Creatures were wounded, crushed, and cut to pieces. Arduously and at a great price, the first line was reforming itself, the survivors of the initial charge rallying around three champions.

They were Effie, Gemma, and Caster.

With each of them turning into a bastion in the sea of monsters and gathering fighters around them, the advance of the horde stalled. Whatever creatures managed to get past were met and eviscerated by the Sleepers of the second line, led by Seishan.

...And throughout all of that, the archers and the siege engines of the third line never stopped firing.

Chapter 318: Siege of the Crimson Spire (4)

"Stand your ground, wretches! If anyone runs, I'll kill you myself!"

Hearing Effie's voice, Kai flinched and forced himself to look away from the terrible visage of the horde of nightmarish abominations. Glancing down, he saw that his hand was shaking and clenched it into a fist. He had to calm himself, somehow, or his aim was going to suffer.

That wouldn't do.

...But honestly, how was a person supposed to not be terrified when a literal sea of Nightmare Creatures, each stronger and deadlier than anything anyone should ever be forced to face, was approaching them so fast?

Kai prided himself on overcoming things like stage fright and social anxiety, as well as getting through many unpalatable situations with grace and elegance, not to mention managing to survive in the Dark City for three long years without losing his humanity.

But this was just too much...

'...What would Sunny say?'

Thinking of his prickly, but adorable friend, Kai couldn't help but smile a little.

'Probably something like... oh, a horde of Nightmare Creatures? Yeah I've met one a few days ago. They all died when I sneezed, though.'

The strangest part was that he would be telling the truth. If Kai decided to dig deeper, he would discover something in the line of Sunny's sneeze causing a massive avalanche that wiped all the monsters out.

...Or, more likely, that his sneeze had awakened some ancient, much more terrifying creature, which then proceeded to devour all the monsters before turning its gaze on Sunny himself.

That was just how Sunny was.

...Unpredictable.

Strangely, these thoughts succeeded in calming Kai down. He only regretted that the cute scoundrel wasn't close by to reassure him in person.

Gazing at the approaching horde, he sighed and gripped his bow tighter.

The coral was sloping down in the place where Changing Star had chosen to face the guardians of the Spire. Because of that, the position of the third line was higher than the other two, which would allow them to continue firing long after Effie and the rest had engaged the Nightmare Creatures in melee.

In theory.

All around him, those Sleepers that had suitable Memories or Aspect Abilities were preparing to shoot, waiting for his command. The surviving Artisans and their assistants were busy loading the six powerful ballistae they had transported all the way from the Dark City and put together the last night. The sight of the mighty siege engines made Kai sigh wistfully.

...Maybe they were going to survive this battle, after all.

"First mark!"

As soon as Effie's shout reached his ears, he turned to the Artisans and waved a hand, giving them the signal to fire.

A second later, six heavy spears flashed through the air and crashed into the wall of monsters. Many of them were eviscerated, but these losses were like a drop of water in the sea of darkness.

Kai gritted his teeth.

"Second mark!"

"Now!"

As his melodic voice rolled over the third line of the Dreamer Army, he drew his bow and took aim.

Back in the real world, archery was Kai's favorite hobby. Not the practical skill of shooting a bow which was taught to many in school, but the ancient practice known as kyudo, which was more of a meditative ritual than a real battle art. Its orderly nature, tranquil philosophy, and repetitive motions appealed to something deep inside him.

The more stressed Kai was, the more he practiced.

Who knew that one day he would be relying on his marksmanship to survive?

Not that aiming at a literal horde of monsters was hard. He didn't have to worry about missing a shot with the Blood Arrow, at least.

Letting go of the string, Kai watched as the black arrow streaked through the air and bit deep into the body of a tall carapace demon. Its bone tip pierced the metal armor of the terrible creature with ease. Not only was it of the Ascended Rank itself, it was also enhanced by Lady Nephis.

Very few creatures could resist his attacks.

"Keep firing! Kill as many as you can!"

The demon swayed, then fell to the ground. Kai felt the weakness that overtook him every time he summoned the morbid Memory dissipate, and called upon the Blood Arrow again.

However, he didn't get to take his second shot before the wave of abominations crashed into the line of Sleepers.

For a second, Kai was stunned by the harrowing sight. The scale of the massacre that was happening below him was just too vast to comprehend. His heart was instantly constricted, full of worry for Effie...

And all the other people he knew.

With a desperate grimace contorting his face, Kai aimed and shot again.

And then he did so again, and again, and again.

Everyone around him was doing everything in their power to kill as many Nightmare Creatures as they could. Arrows, magical projectiles, and heavy lances launched by the ballistae rained on the ghastly horde, reaping countless lives.

But it was not enough, not nearly enough...

Seeing so many people be torn to pieces and devoured while trying to protect him and the other archers, Kai couldn't help but wish that he could do more.

'If only I could fly up and get a better shot... if only I could get closer!'

...But he couldn't.

While others lost themselves in the battle completely, Kai had to keep a cool head. After all, he was responsible for the third line of the Dreamer Army. The lives of all these young men and women depended on him.

That was why he kept his eyes on the merciless grey sky.

Just a few meters above them, almost invisible in the bright light of dawn, a vast net made out of sharp iron wire was drawn above the battlefield.

The wire for this net was collected in the Labyrinth, from those areas where iron spiders were known to nest, and fashioned into the aerial barrier by the Artisans.

It was meant to protect them from the terrifying creatures that could fall at any moment from the skies.

After all, the Crimson Spire did not only have a Terror and a horde of guardians.

It also had its Messengers...

Chapter 319: Siege of the Crimson Spire (5)

"Draw your bows! Take aim! Endure!"

Kai's words were meant to keep the morale of his troops more than they were meant to serve as actual instructions. To tell the truth, he did not have to do much, at least not yet. There were no such things as coordinated volleys when it came to archers — everyone just had to send one arrow after another into the seething mass of Nightmare Creatures, as fast as they could.

He had to do the same, too.

On the ground near him, several quivers full of arrows waited for their turn. Kai was shooting without a respite, alternating between using the Blood Arrow and these mundane ones. It took time for the ghastly Memory to return to his hands, so he had to use something else in-between.

A good archer had to be able to fire twelve times in a minute. An excellent one — twice that.

Gritting his teeth, Kai drew his bow, took aim, held his breath, and fired. Every movement had to be efficient, quick, and precise. As soon as one shot was done, another one immediately started. Draw, aim, release. Draw, aim, release. Repeat, and repeat, and repeat...

In these moments, he had become less of a human and more of a methodical battle machine that ran on all cylinders without stopping even for a moment.

He put an arrow in the eye of a terrible abomination that looked like a giant snake made of seaweed and rotting flesh. Another pierced the chest of a massive bestial primate and impaled him on the carapace of a mantis-like creature. The third bit into the neck of the mantis and greedily drank its tainted blood, causing the monster to stumble and fall.

Kai felt like he was drowning.

Back in the waking world, archers were always portrayed as nimble, graceful warriors, someone who excelled in agility and speed as opposed to brute strength and physical might. They were beautiful maidens, elegant youths, and cunning rogues. Maybe that was why he had been attracted to bowmanship, to begin with.

The reality, however... couldn't be further from the truth.

It took a lot of strength to pull the string of a combat bow. The draw weight of a good bow was as much as fifty kilograms, on average. Twenty times the weight of a sword...

And Memory bows like his were much more monstrous. They were never meant for mundane humans, so pulling that string every few seconds burned through his stamina in mere minutes. Very soon, Kai's muscles screamed in pain, and his lungs seemed to be on fire.

But he couldn't stop... he had to keep shooting, no matter what.

"Keep at it! Draw, aim! Endure!"

How could he allow this insignificant pain, this unearned exhaustion to slow him down when out there, below, so many humans were dying in agony to keep the enemy away from the line of archers?

Letting loose another arrow, Kai drew in a hoarse breath and glanced up, almost out of habit.

However, this time, his gaze lingered on the indifferent grey skies. Then, his eyes widened.

At some point, five black dots appeared high above the battlefield, flying in an eerily perfect circle above it. A cold chill ran down Kai's back.

"Messengers..."

Five Fallen Monsters were observing the massacre that was happening below them with vile indifference. Even though he could not see their harrowing shapes too well, Kai could somehow feel their gaze.

'...Why aren't they attacking?'

As if to answer his question, a smaller dot appeared from the clouds and fell down through the circle created by the Messengers. And then, another. And another...

Just a second later, countless Nightmare Creatures poured from the grey skies and dove down, swiftly approaching the ground. There were so many of them that their mass resembles a swirling black column of a colossal tornado.

Kai trembled. His face paled.

...However, he did not allow fear to prevent him from fulfilling his duty.

"Skyward squads! Aim high!"

At this point, about half of the Sleepers in the third line were supposed to switch their attention and repel the aerial threat. However, engrossed in the battle that was happening below, most of them didn't hear or understand his words.

Kai grimaced.

And then, his clear, enchanting voice rolled over the entire battlefield once again, this time easily piercing through the clangor and havoc of the terrible strife:

"Skyward! Squads! Aim high!"

This was the voice he had used to sing the most difficult notes in front of hundreds of thousands of people. Only the dead could not hear it.

Brought back to reality by his voice, the archers quickly aimed at the sky.

...Just in time.

Kai let the Blood Arrow loose, then saw it fly upward and hit one of the winged abominations in the chest. The monster convulsed and dropped

vertically down, hitting the sharp wires of the iron net with a sickening sound.

A tremor ran through the entire net, and drops of black blood fell to the ground.

Stretching his hand to grab a mundane arrow, Kai had a moment to take in the sight of the descending swarm. For a moment, his heart was squeezed by despair.

There were so many of the flying Nightmare Creatures that it was impossible to count them all. Among the swarm of horrors, there were the giant locusts he had fought before, massive abominations with hungry maws and bat-like wings, repulsive birds with fleshy tentacles growing from beneath their pale feathers, and many more. Horrors he had never seen and could have never imagined.

...And above them, five black dots continued to circle in the sky.

Putting the arrow on the string of his bow, Kai banished fear and doubt from his heart and drew it. Then, he aimed at the closest of the abominations and willed it to die.

A moment later, his arrow hit the creature right in the eye.

Most of the archers around him had already switched their targets. Only the siege engine crews and those with Abilities and Memories unsuitable for firing upward continued to pelt the nightmare horde with deadly projectiles.

The quickest of the descending monsters were eviscerated, and soon, a rain of corpses fell on the iron net.

...But a few lucky ones had avoided the arrows and dove down to devour the humans who stood on the ground.

Kai held his breath when the first of them hit the iron wires at full speed.

What if the net broke?

But it did not... at least for now. The Artisans had done their job well.

Instead, the creature was instantly sliced apart, its body disintegrating into a rain of blood and strangely symmetrical chunks of flesh. The sight of it was morbidly fascinating.

'...Thank gods.'

Reaching for another arrow, Kai found nothing but emptiness. Looking down in confusion, he saw that his quivers were empty.

'Have I... used so many?'

Before he had time to process that thought, however, someone had already thrown two fresh quivers on the ground in front of him.

Picking up an arrow with aching fingers, Kai inhaled through his teeth and raised his bow.

"Draw! Aim! Endure!"

Chapter 320: Siege of the Crimson Spire (6)

"Draw! Aim! Endure!"

Just as Night shouted these words, Aiko tripped and fell. The bundle of arrows she was carrying in her arms scattered on the ground.

"Ouch..."

Picking herself up from the coral, she hurriedly gathered the arrows and dashed to the nearest archer, then placed them near his feet.

In this battle, the role of people like her — those who were too weak to fight and did not possess a useful Aspect — was simultaneously the most simple and the most chaotic. They were charged with supplying the Sleepers participating in the battle with everything they needed, be it arrows, crossbow bolts, stones for their slings, or anything else.

There were several teams of runners doing different things. Initially, she was supposed to help carry the wounded from the first and second lines to the makeshift hospital at the back of the formation. There, a few people with Aspect Abilities having to do with healing waited, ready to help. Her friend Stev was one of them.

...But as it turned out, there wasn't a lot of wounded in this battle. Most simply died on the spot. So she was left with nothing to do and ended up here, helping to supply the archers.

She had just brought two quivers to Night, and was on her way...

...Wait, how crazy was that?

Trying to catch her breath, Aiko glanced around and shivered.

'Crazy, this is crazy...'

The scene in front of her was just too bizarre to be true. Several hundred Sleepers were besieged by a horde of Nightmare Creatures on the ground, with another falling on them from above. All that in front of an ugly, endless tower of crimson coral. Surely, she was dreaming...

'Of course you are! This is the Dream Realm, you dimwit!'

And yet, the weirdest thing of all... was that she was stuck in all this craziness with none other than Night from Nightingale, the breathtakingly beautiful idol whose posters hung on the walls of most girls her age back home. Despite the fact that the two of them had known each other for more than a year and were even... uh... on friendly terms, this fact was the one that pushed the surrealism of the situation over the edge.

This was exactly the kind of weird dream a teenage girl like her would have.

Just as she thought about that, someone fell to the ground a few meters away from her. Turning her head to the sound of a muffled curse, Aiko saw Stev and another Sleeper carrying a crude stretcher. On it was a young woman, covered in blood and pale as a ghost, her leather armor torn apart and on the verge of dissipating.

A moment before, Stev's partner had tumbled down. It appeared as though he was wounded himself, albeit not too seriously. Running up to them, Aiko took over and helped the ample giant keep the stretcher even.

Carrying that weight with her tiny body was not easy, but she gritted her teeth and persevered.

Together, they hurried to the back of the formation.

On the way, they had to run past the desperate archers and the exhausted crews of the siege engines, who were slowly but surely running out of the massive lances to hurl at the rampaging horde.

From the look of it, things weren't going well for the Dreamer Army.

Down below, the first line was in the process of being completely eviscerated. Three islands of resistance still persisted in the sea of monsters, but Aiko didn't know how much longer those poor people would be able to hold. The second line was now entangled with the Nightmare Creatures, too. The initial plan had been for these two forces to switch positions to give the exhausted warriors time to rest, but now, it was never going to happen.

Up above, more and more corpses were falling on the invisible iron net. Despite that, the number of the flying abominations did not seem to diminish at all. The metal wires were groaning, having to carry more and more weight.

'Are we all going to die?'

Feeling cold dread spread through her body, Aiko trembled and involuntarily turned her head to the tallest point in the Dreamer Army camp. There, on a protruding mound of crimson coral, she saw three figures.

One was Saint Nephis herself. The other was her blind oracle. And the third...

'Wait... what is that guy doing there?!'

The third person was none other than Sunny, the strange young man who had gotten her into this mess to begin with.

After joining the Changing Star's faction, Aiko had quickly learned who the important people were and what positions they held in the Bright Lady's cohort. Everyone's role was clear and easy to understand.

...Except for Sunny.

What role that pale youth played was entirely unclear. People seemed to consider him a member of Lady Nephis's cohort, but Sunny himself always insisted that he was not. He was thought to be a competent fighter, but actually, no one had really seen him fight.

Most people just knew him for his tendency to keep to himself, ridiculous bragging, and carefree attitude. They simultaneously respected him for being Changing Star's scout and considered him mostly harmless.

However, Aiko did not think that Sunny was harmless. She had seen him appear from the shadows and kill the Guard who had been strangling her with one relaxed move, as though getting rid of an insect.

In her mind, Sunny was very mysterious. He was a wild card.

Seeing him with Lady Nephis now, she suddenly felt a tiny bit of hope.

Maybe Changing Star had a plan.

Maybe they were going to survive, after all...

"Aiko! Move your short legs faster, will you!"

Frowning at Stev's remark, she looked at the ground and concentrated on not slowing her giant friend down.

Soon, they reached the hospital and placed the stretcher on the makeshift table. Stev dashed to retrieve his tools...

But it was too late. The young girl on the stretcher was already dead.

Aiko remained motionless for a bit, staring at the ground. After a while, Stev cautiously touched her on the shoulder.

"Hey... are you okay, shorty?"

She wiped her face, then nodded.

"Yeah. I'm fine. Gotta run, though. Those... those arrows aren't going to carry themselves."

Stev lingered for a bit, then tried to smile.

"Alright. Uh... stay safe."

She smiled and nodded again.

"Yeah. You stay safe, too."

With that, Aiko turned around and ran out of the tent.

Outside, the battle was only growing more ferocious.

Chapter 321: Siege of the Crimson Spire (7)

Sunny stood at the peak of a tall coral mound, observing the battle that raged below. There was a slight frown on his face, but his eyes were calm.

The Dreamer Army was besieged from two sides. One horde of abominations was slowly devouring its front line, while another had descended on them from above, stalled for now by the vast net of sharp iron wires.

...It was like a scene from a fever nightmare.

Every second, humans were dying, torn apart by the claws and fangs of the harrowing horde of monsters. Their cries and screams fused with the roaring wails of the Nightmare Creatures into a deafening wave of dissonant noise. That wave washed over the crimson coral, sending a chill running down his spine.

Turning away from the bloodsoaked visage of the battlefield, Sunny glanced at Nephis.

Changing Star was sitting on the ground. Her face was calm, and her eyes were closed. On her forehead, the gem of the Dawn Shard burned with furious white light, feeding hundreds upon hundreds of Memories with raw power. She appeared to be in the depths of profound meditation, seemingly not affected by the horrible decimation that was happening below them at all.

Cassie was standing beside her, looking at the ground. Her hand rested on the hilt of the Quiet Dancer. The other two Echoes of the blind girl had been with the first line of the army during the initial charge; by now, they were already destroyed.

Sunny wanted to say something, but then thought better of it. The time for conversations was over.

Instead, he faced the Crimson Spire. His gaze lingered on it for a few moments, then slid back to the terrible sight of the slaughter. Straining his eyes, Sunny tried to distinguish the figures of Effie and Kai in the chaotic formation of the Dreamer Army.

'Don't die just yet, fools...'

Down below, surrounded by those warriors of the first line that still stubbornly clung to life, Effie had long forgotten about anything else but bloodshed and strife. The scope of the world had narrowed to the suffocating confines of the furious battle, consuming both the past and the future.

There was only the present, and the present consisted of nothing but violence and death.

...And killing, of course.

With a mad grin on her bloodied face, she faced one abomination after another, crushing, breaking, and tearing them apart. Her tall, lean body had turned into a lethal battle machine, moving with ferocious speed and devastating power, deadly precision and murderous will. Both Zenith and Dusk behaved like natural extensions of her limbs, alternating between attack and defense to reap one profane life after another.

Her armor had been pierced several times, but she paid it no attention. It didn't matter. All that mattered was to kill as many Nightmare Creatures as possible, to obliterate as many of the hateful monsters as she could. Their corpses piled up, carpeting the crimson coral with an uninterrupted bleeding mass of broken flesh. After a while, Effie had to start watching her step carefully.

Despite that, the number of abominations showed no sign of growing smaller. It was as though the horde was endless and boundless. But she wasn't scared...

In fact, Effie was enjoying herself.

Oh, this was so exhilarating!

Dodging a serrated claw, she lunged forward and crushed the ribcage of an attacking monster with the rim of her shield, then used the remaining momentum to skewer another one on her spear. With no time to retrieve her weapon and turn, she used the shaft of Zenith Shard to deflect a blow from a mighty pincer of a carapace scavenger and kicked the beast viciously, shattering the adamantite shell of its armor.

Other Sleepers were fighting around her, using the fearsome huntress as an anchor in the sea of death. They were still holding, still breathing. Two other islands of resistance had formed around Gemma and Caster, who were also in the throes of the battle trance.

The proud Legacy had turned into a whirlwind of ghostly steel, eviscerating any creature that dared to approach him. His movements were so fast that his enemies' blood could not even fall to the ground. As the result, Caster was constantly surrounded by a cloud of red mist.

The experienced Hunter fought with cunning and skill, sending one abomination after another into the embrace of death. Whatever wounds appeared on Gemma's body were soon gone, not even leaving a trace. Numerous fearsome creatures had been slain by his hand, unable to do the tall man any harm.

...And yet, humans were dying. One after another, they fell, leaving less and warriors to hold back the gluttonous horde.

As Effie fought, a sudden thought entered her mind, sending a slight shiver running through her body.

'...Heavy. That damn shield is so heavy...'

She was growing tired.

Kai had lost count of the number of monsters he killed. Because of the constant cycle of losing blood and magically getting it back, he felt slightly lightheaded. Luckily, he had yet to miss a shot... maybe?... and was able to continue firing.

More and more corpses fell on the iron net, their blood flowing on the people below. It was as though they were now fighting in the rain. A red, fetid rain of blood...

Blood, blood, blood. No matter where he looked, he saw nothing but blood.

He was sick of it.

Gritting his teeth, Kai drew his bow once again, aimed between two dead creatures above him, and sent an arrow flying.

[You have slain an awakened...]

They were running out of arrows.

The siege engines were running out of lances, too.

And the damn Messengers were still circling high above, not even trying to descend.

'Why, why aren't they attacking?!'

Looking down, Kai tried to catch his breath and muttered:

"Curses..."

Why was it so dark? He couldn't see where his quivers were.

Something shifted in his mind, and then he blinked.

Looking up again, Kai realized that the entire net was now covered with corpses. There were so many dead Nightmare Creatures that they formed a macabre carpet that veiled the battlefield from the sun.

There wasn't a lot of daylight seeping through the net now, and it was growing darker and darker with each second.

His eyes widened.

Not because of the deep darkness, but because Kai suddenly heard the iron wires groaning under all that weight. Almost as if strained too much and on the verge of tearing apart.

The protective net was going to break soon.

His face paled.

'Oh no!'

On the tall mound of crimson coral, Changing Star suddenly opened her eyes and looked at Sunny.

"It's time."

Chapter 322: siege of the Crimson Spire (8)

Things were turning from dire to desperate for the Dreamer Army. The first line was almost gone, and the second was now completely engulfed by the horde of Nightmare Creatures. Seishan was still standing her ground, but just barely.

The archers under Kai's command were doing their best to eviscerate as many monsters as they could, but with their attention split between those on the ground and those diving at the iron net from above, the results weren't as devastating as they had been during the initial stage of the battle.

They were running out of arrows and ammunition, too. The siege engines were slowly disintegrating under the pressure of so many consecutive shots. The people were tired.

...And the iron net itself looked as though it was going to break soon. It was covered with a carpet of dead Nightmare Creatures, submerging the battlefield into dim twilight. With every minute, that twilight was turning darker and darker.

The human formation seemed to be balancing on the very edge of collapse.

It was at that moment that Nephis, who had been calmly meditating through all of that, suddenly opened her eyes.

In them, two blinding white flames were burning. Her pale face became illuminated by this radiance, like that of a merciless celestial creature.

Turning to Sunny, she remained silent for a moment, and then said:

"It's time."

He sighed.

Indeed, it was time for the two of them to enter the fray and play their roles.

As Neph stood up and summoned her sword, he flexed his shoulders and stretched his neck. The Midnight Shard, however, remained hidden in the depths of the Shadow Core.

Sunny glanced at Cassie, hesitated for a few seconds, and then smiled.

"Hey, Cas. I'll... see you on the other side, I guess."

She lingered for a bit, then nodded slowly and turned away.

'...Don't die.'

He sighed.

"That's my cue, I guess."

Together, he and Nephis walked over to the edge of the coral mound and jumped down, leaving the blind girl standing alone on its top.

Softly landing on the ground, Sunny waved to Neph and said in an even tone:

"I'll go first. Good luck."

With that, he turned in the direction of the battlefield and inhaled deeply.

In front of him, the desperately fighting Dreamer Army was intertwined with the nightmare horde in the darkness cast by the groaning net of iron wires.

The whole battlefield had turned into a realm of blood, death... and shadow. The more corpses piled on the net, the deeper and darker the shadows became.

This was Sunny's territory now.

Stepping into the darkness, he suddenly became almost invisible. The shadows embraced him as one of their own, hiding his figure and

movements. Veiled in their embrace, he steeled his will and dashed toward the battlefield.

Moving forward, Sunny ran past the tent of the makeshift hospital where a group of people was supposed to be desperately trying to save those lucky few who had managed to receive a non-lethal wound.

Right now, however, the tent was partially toppled and engulfed in chaos. One of the flying Nightmare Creatures had somehow managed to squeeze under the net and was now wreaking havoc inside of it, its black body pierced by several arrows, but still full of deadly power Freewebnovel.com.

Sunny moved past it without looking back.

Stepping through the deepest, darkest shadows, he ran past the line of siege engines and noticed the small figure of Aiko helping an exhausted Artisan load one last spear into position. The steel lance was clearly too heavy for the delicate girl, but she was pushing it up with stubborn determination.

Then, he was between the rows of archers. These people were continuing to fire, desperately trying to find clear spots between the numerous corpses piled on top of the trembling iron net. He saw Kai looking around with a lost look on his face.

Sunny wanted to stop and reassure his friend, but couldn't.

Sliding between these people without being noticed, he left the third line and dashed toward the second.

Here, his task of remaining unseen became much harder.

The second line had lost almost all pretense of order, but remained unbroken. With the warriors under Effie's command still taking the brunt of the horde and withstanding its pressure, Seishan had managed to prevent any abominations from reaching the archers.

...At least for now.

Dodging the defending humans and the attacking monsters, Sunny entered the crucible of battle. He wasn't here to fight, however. His goal was still ahead.

Moving unseen, he evaded several vicious skirmishes. Somewhere along the way, he noticed Seishan herself.

The beautiful woman was fighting with darkly fascinating grace. The Sunlight Shard rose and fell, guided by her slender hand. The amount of power delivered by these strikes, however, was nothing short of terrifying.

Every time the war hammer stroke, a Nightmare Creature was broken apart, with bits of chiting, bone, and streams of blood flying into the air.

It was still not enough, though. After another blow, a menacing figure of a carapace scavenger suddenly grasped the Memory in its powerful pincer and tore it away from Seishan's hand. In the next moment, a subtle change happened to the body of the graceful Handmaiden.

It seemed as though she grew taller, her limbs elongating, her spine twisting. Her smooth grey skin became like that of a shark, and her eyes rolled back, revealing a second pair of pupils, these ones vertical and surrounded by a sea of red.

Seishan's jaw unhinged, revealing several rows of terrible fangs. Dashing forward, she easily broke the carapace of the Nightmare Creature with her bare fist. A fraction of a second later, her jaws closed on the joint of the pincer, piercing the chitin, and tore the entire limb apart.

Leaving that disturbing scene behind, Sunny moved into another layer of shadows and ran toward the first line.

There, the mass of abominations and surviving humans was almost impenetrable. And yet, he had to pierce it.

Drawing in a deep breath, Sunny dove into the sea of Nightmare Creatures.

Moving between the endless horde of monsters like a dancer, he dodged and avoided their chaotically moving bodies, keeping to the shadows. If he was noticed, he was going to be torn apart in mere seconds. If he slowed down, he was going to be crushed and obliterated.

Like a shadow, Sunny slid between them. A few times, he had to quickly dash beneath an especially tall abomination or jump over another. For a few seconds, he even ran on top of these horrible monsters, jumping from the shoulder of one to the carapace of another, and then back to the bloodied, slippery ground.

On his way, he saw Effie. The huntress had either lost or dismissed her shield, and was now spinning her spear and using it to deliver both piercing and slashing attacks, drawing wide arcs in the air with its bronze blade. Her body was covered in blood and her armor was broken and shattered.

But on her face, there was a wide, joyful grin.

Leaving it all behind, Sunny moved deeper into the horde of monsters. A few times, he thought that he would be noticed. But in the end, the shadows had kept him safe.

And after a while... an eternity, maybe... he finally broke free of the endless mass of Nightmare Creatures.

Now, there was nothing in front of him but the wide expanse of the cursed black water.

...And the mass of the Crimson Spire stretching endlessly into the skies.

Chapter 323: Siege of the Crimson Spire (9)

Sunny froze for a moment, captivated by the all-encompassing expanse of the cyclopean spire that towered above the entire world.

Almost at the same moment, the darkness behind him was suddenly annihilated by a blinding explosion of light. The noise of the battle changed, somehow growing even more intense. The howling of the nightmare horde grew louder, but also became slightly muffled, almost... anxious.

Changing Star had finally joined the fight.

A moment later, hundreds of human voices rose in a deafening battle cry, their spirit lifted, their crumbling resolve restored. With Nephis arriving on the battlefield, the balance of the whole battle shifted. The Nightmare Creatures surged to destroy the radiant figure, only to be obliterated by it. They almost seem to melt under the furious assault of the incandescent blade, turning into cinder and ash.

Neph's arrival brought a moment of relief to the exhausted warriors of the Dreamer Army. Instead of using it to catch their breaths and regroup, however, they chose to use this opportunity to launch into a ferocious attack, making the horde shudder and recoil.

...Sunny was not paying any attention to what was happening behind his back, though. His eyes were locked on the bridge of crimson coral that stretched across the vast whirlpool of black water, creating a path to the island on which the cursed Spire stood.

On it were countless abominations, each of them pushing, howling, fighting for their turn to taste soft human flesh.

However, the harrowing mass of them wasn't endless anymore. He could actually see the tail of the nightmare horde, with the distant half of the bridge being almost empty.

Not that it was going to make things easy for him. As soon as Sunny escaped from beneath the iron net, he became illuminated by the bright sunlight, with nowhere else to hide. Completely exposed.

The eyes of numerous monsters were already on him, bloodlust and hunger igniting in their depths. If he wanted to use the bridge, he was going to have to cut his way through the undulating mass of Nightmare Creatures.

'Saint.'

Answering his call, the marble demon appeared from the shadows, her ruby eyes burning with cold menace behind the visor of the onyx helmet. The taciturn knight stood silently on the shore of the rushing black water, gazing at the horde of monsters across its dark expanse.

Sunny took a few steps back and glanced at the mass of abominations who were already lunging in his direction.

'Here goes nothing...'

Dashing forward, he crossed the distance to the Saint... and jumped.

The Shadow raised her shield, allowing him to step on it, and then pushed away with all her incredible strength. Simultaneously, Sunny launched himself off this unlikely springboard and shot into the air.

The wind whistled in his ears.

Soaring above the mass of black water, and all the horrors that hid in its depths, he flew toward the Crimson Spire with terrible speed. The Dark Wing turned into a blur behind his back, making Sunny weightless, and thus prolonging this state of flight.

It was still not nearly enough to reach the island, however.

In a few short seconds, he crossed almost half of the wide surface of the dark whirlpool. But then, his momentum slowed, and soon, Sunny started to fall. Thanks to the transparent cloak, he didn't plunge straight down, instead gliding through the air, slowly approaching the seething black water.

He was never going to make it.

...But then, he was never planning to.

Twisting his body, Sunny hurled the Prowling Thorn at the crimson coral of the bridge. As soon as the heavy kunai bit into it, he forcefully pulled on the invisible string, changing the direction of his flight.

A few seconds later, Sunny landed on the bridge in a roll and jumped to his feet. Behind him, the tail end of the nightmare horde was still oblivious to his presence.

In front of him was a clear path to the Crimson Spire.

Dismissing the Dark Wing and summoning Shadow Saint back into his core, Sunny ran forward without wasting even a moment to look back.

Soon, the Crimson Spire eclipsed the whole sky. It seemed as though the world suddenly made a ninety-degree turn, the ground itself becoming vertical instead of horizontal. Even craning his neck, Sunny couldn't see the top of the ominous tower anymore.

It was as if the Dream Realm was like a box, and he had reached one of its walls. The edge of reality itself.

Throwing all unnecessary thoughts out of his head, Sunny rushed toward the Spire. His goal was almost in sight.

'Seven severed heads... guarding seven locks...'

This was what Cassie had told them a year ago, at the start of this cursed journey. Somewhere at the base of the Crimson Spire, there was a place where one could insert seven keys into seven locks to seal the curse of the all-consuming darkness underground once more, thus restoring the oath of the ancient heroes.

Shard Memories had given ChangingS Star's cohort these keys, and now, Sunny held all of them in his soul.

He just had to find the locks...

And very soon, he did.

Hidden behind a tall mound of crimson coral, a vast expanse of flat surface led all the way to the walls of the corrupted Spire. On it, arranged in a wide semi-circle, seven giant heads stared away from Sunny.

Despite the fact that they were facing the other way, he recognized them immediately.

These were the stolen heads of the seven colossal statues that stood across the desolate hell of the Forgotten Shore, ones that had been torn off their shoulders by the Crimson Terror thousands of years ago and then brought here, to lay at the base of its citadel for all eternity.

The Lord, the Priestess, the Knight, the Hunter, the Builder, the Slayer, and the Stranger.

Their gazes were aimed at the gargantuan gates of the Spire.

And there, on those gates, the image of seven shining stars was engraved into the ancient stone.

Each star had a dark keyhole in its radiant center.

Chapter 324: Siege of the Crimson Spire (10)

Summoning Saint to stand side by side with him once again, Sunny glanced at the gates of the Spire, grimaced, and jumped down from the mound of coral.

'I don't like this at all...'

Out there on the island, it was quiet. Too quiet.

Even though all the Nightmare Creatures were now behind him, slowly devouring the Dreamer Army, the open space pierced by the gazes of the severed heads of stone colossus was too ominous and foreboding to not spell trouble.

But Sunny was done being afraid a long time ago.

'You fear me, instead.'

Walking forward, he passed between the giant heads and entered the empty space in front of the cyclopean gates. Feeling as though someone was staring at his back, Sunny shivered and approached the seven locks.

Halfway to the gates, he stopped, hesitated for a moment and then looked back, at stone heads.

This was the first time he saw the faces of the seven heroes.

The face of the Lord was noble and dignified, the face of the Priestess — beautiful and gentle. The Slayer was arrogant and cold, her lips twisted in a crooked grin. The Stranger wore a helmet, darkness nesting in the crack of its visor.

'...People. They were just people.'

Turning away, Sunny sighed, then shook his head in dejection.

'I won't judge you for what you have done. But I hope... I really that we will be able to do better.'

With that, he took another step forward... and froze.

Something had changed on the stretch of land between him and the gates of the Crimson Spire. A cold wind suddenly howled, throwing bits of coral into the air.

Those pieces of did not fall down. Instead, more and more of the crimson shards flew up, slowly forming into seven twisted silhouettes.

Sunny cursed and outstretched his hand, summoning the Midnight Shard into it.

A few seconds later, seven golems of crimson coral stood in front of him and Saint, blocking the path to the star sigil. He recognized their shapes.

The armored figure of the Knight. The slender figure of the Slayer. The graceful figure of the Priestess...

Vile, corrupted facsimiles of the seven heroes slowly moved, raising their weapons to point at him. Their movements were crude and inhuman, but radiated a sense of terrible, profane power. Despite their outward appearance, he felt that these creatures were desecrating the memory of the ancient heroes instead of manifesting it.

Sunny grinned and walked toward the coral golems, the blade of his sword pointed downward.

"Seven of you? Do you really think this will be enough to stop me?"

His dark eyes gleamed, turning cold and ruthless.

"...Well then, fools, come and get me!"

With that, he dashed forward and raised the Midnight Shard.

Before Sunny could strike, however, the Stranger appeared in front of him as though out of nowhere and put his round shield in the path of the austere tachi. Hitting it felt like hitting a mountain.

Sunny's eyes widened.

'Fast...'

A fraction of a second later, he noticed a beak of a war hammer flying toward his temple with terrible speed. Gritting his teeth, Sunny shifted and blocked it with the blade of the Midnight Shard.

As a painful shockwave rolled through his body, he was thrown backward and slid on the red coral, then groaned and spat a mouthful of blood.

'Damn it! How are they so strong?!'

Looking up, he saw seven tall figures approaching him with steady, inevitable malice. Each of the golems was powerful enough to rip an entire cohort of Sleepers to pieces.

To his side, Saint raised her shield and hit its rim twice with the blade of her sword.

'Whatever. Let's do this!'

Back across the whirlpool of black water, the Dreamer Army was still furiously resisting the horde of Nightmare Creatures. By now, all of the monsters had left the coral bridge and descended upon the Sleepers, consumed by the mad desire for human flesh.

There was no distinction between the first and the second line now. All those still alive were engulfed by the bloody chaos of the slaughter, desperately trying to survive in the midst of absolute chaos.

Changing Star was at the center of the terrible bloodshed, shining like a radiant sun. She fought alone, because no one else could survive the

devastating pressure that the horde exerted in the zealous attempts to extinguish that light. Any human that tried to approach and help her was immediately torn to pieces.

Indifferent to everything, Nephis moved like a furious deity, eviscerating one abomination after another. All around her, burning corpses littered the ground, their cursed blood boiling and evaporating into the air. Not only was her presence relieving the pressure from the rest of the Sleepers, but they also found strength in it.

As long as Changing Star fought for their salvation, how could they give up? As long as her light was there to banish the darkness, how could they lose hope?

That was why no monster had managed to break through the remnants of the first two lines and reach the archers.

Standing on the slippery surface of the crimson coral, Kai gazed at the terrible scene of the massacre below him, and then raised his face to the sky.

Instead of the sky, however, he saw the dark mass of bleeding corpses carpeting the iron net. His face paled, light disappearing from his eyes.

As the last officer of the Dreamer Army to not engaged in the melee, he was the only one who could see the bigger picture.

He was the only one who knew that the iron net was mere minutes away from breaking.

When it did, the mass of sharp iron wires and all the crushing weight of countless dead monsters was going to fall on the remains of the human formation, spelling their doom.

Someone had to do something...

And that someone was him.

Kai blinked, then closed his eyes for a moment.

'Of course. I am the only one who can.'

Nothing could stop the collapse of the iron net. But the manner in which it collapsed could be controlled. All they had to do was to cut it at a suitable spot, allowing for the mass of dead Nightmare Creatures to fall down without burying the fighting humans beneath it.

And who could cut the iron wires beside a person capable of flying?

The only problem was that once the net was cut... nothing was going to stop the five Spire Messengers from entering through the breach.

He was going to have to lead them away from the battlefield, too.

'...Yes. Yes, this is what I have to do.'

Dismissing his heavy bow, Kai stared at the ground for a few moments. An elegant falcata slowly appeared in his hand.

And then, with an expression of dark resolve appearing on his face, he pushed himself off the crimson coral and flew to the strained iron net.

Chapter 325: Siege of the Crimson Spire (11)

"Argh! Damn it!"

Effie stumbled back and swiped the Zenith Shard in a wide arc, cutting through the bodies of several Nightmare Creatures. With her other hand, she took hold of the oversized translucent tick that bit deep into her thigh and tore it away, losing a chunk of flesh in the process. Before the repulsive creature had time to sever her fingers with its sharp mandibles, she crushed it in her fist.

Feeling hot blood streaming down her leg, she grimaced and unceremoniously wiped the pulverized remains of the tick on the fabric of the Sunlight Shard, then spun to follow the trajectory of her spear.

Effie was tired. So, so tired. She was utterly exhausted.

...But there was no end to the nightmarish horde.

'Can't you all just die, bastards...'

Catching the shaft of the Zenith Shard with both hands once again, she thrust it back and skewered another abomination with its sauroter, then tore the sharp spike away and dashed to the side. A moment later, a terrifying scythe of a carapace centurion sunk into the spot where she had just been. Effie spun the spear and lashed out with it, piercing the chest of the massive creature and killing it on the spot.

As the heavy body fell to the ground and sent tremors through it, she had a second to draw in a pained, raspy breath. Her wounded leg almost buckled.

'Why is no one covering my back...'

Effie looked around to check on the fellow Sleepers who had been fighting by her side, but failed to see anyone.

All around her, there was nothing but the endless mass of Nightmare Creatures.

Everyone was already dead.

...Except for her.

"Ha. Ha-ha. Ha!"

Effie was left alone in the sea of monsters, separated from the remnants of the Dreamer Army by an impenetrable wall of claws and chitin. She only knew that someone was still alive and fighting back there because of the radiant white light that continued to illuminate the vast expanse of the battlefield... of this tomb that they had built for themselves from iron wires and dead Nightmare Creatures.

Not that the light could reach where she stood. Here, there was nothing but darkness.

She didn't have much hope of reaching it, too.

Effie looked at the ground and smiled bitterly.

Then, she raised her head high and stared at the approaching tide of monsters, her eyes sparkling with dark amusement.

"Come then, beasts. Oh, what a feast this will be..."

Sunny barely avoided the blade of the coral sword and deflected it to the side with the Midnight Shard. Then, he tried to counterattack, but was forced to jump back with a muffled curse. A sharp stiletto flew past his face, leaving a shallow cut on his cheek.

'Damned abominations!'

Currently, he was facing against three golems at the same time. The Knight, The Slayer, and the Priestess were trying to surround him. They moved with

terrifying speed and possessed enough power to obliterate a Sleeper with laughable ease.

Luckily, Sunny was not just any Sleeper. The shadow was wrapped around his body, making him faster and stronger. With its help, he was barely able to hold on and remain alive.

...For now.

Some distance away from him, Saint was facing off against the Stranger, the Builder, and the Hunter. Those three seemed to be even more ferocious than his own opponents, so the Shadow was having a lot of trouble, too.

'That doesn't make any sense...'

Sunny was not surprised that these constructs were far more powerful than him. But Saint was an awakened demon, and one of the most dangerous Nightmare Creatures of her Rank he had ever seen, no less. And yet, she was barely able to remain in one piece.

Good thing that the Lord had yet to join the fight. The seventh golem stood motionlessly some distance away, as though uninterested in the fight.

Because of how fast his enemies were and their numerical advantage, Sunny had to summon the Moonlight Shard as well. Now, he was holding the tachi in one hand and the stiletto in the other. This wasn't what he was used to and made his offense weaker, but allowed him to bolster his defense.

This was one of the reasons why Sunny was still alive.

Suddenly, a blast of light hammered into his eyes, making him stagger and blinding him for a few short moments. In the next second, the Priestess lunged at him. She wielded no weapons, but her coral hands were deadly enough to serve as a pair of them.

Trusting the Shadow Sense, Sunny dodged and brought the Midnight Shard down, hoping to catch the golem. His second hand moved, blocking a strike

of the Slayer. Just as before, the impact almost shattered the bones in his wrist and sent Sunny reeling.

He had successfully resisted the attack and bought himself enough time to regain his vision, only to be faced with the furious threat of another assault, this one coming from the Knight.

Saint wasn't having any more luck. Her shield had been caught by the beak of the Builder's war hammer and pulled down, which gave the Hunter an opportunity to thrust his spear into the breach in her defense. At the same time, the Stranger was preparing to attack her from behind.

'This can't go on much longer... think, think!'

Sunny felt as though he was missing some crucial fact about this arduous, lethal fight. He had to solve it before the last golem joined in...

Twisting his body to deflect the incoming strike, he frowned.

...Why had the Lord not attacked?

There was something about it...

Suddenly, Sunny's eyes narrowed.

'Can it be?'

The golems were created in the image of the ancient heroes, and even wielded the same weapons. He had managed to resist his attackers for so long partially because he was intimately acquainted with their armaments.

After all, he held the Midnight and Moonlight Shard in his hands.

If their weapons were the same as his Shard Memories, just made out of crimson coral... was it the same for the Lord?

Did the Crimson Terror create its own equivalent of the Crown of Dawn, and was it currently feeding the seven golems with power?

The Lord was standing alone, seemingly indifferent to the battle that was happening in front of him.

...Just like Nephis sat away from the battlefield at the start of the siege, the gem of the Dawn Shard burning brightly on her forehead.

If the seventh golem was doing to the other six what Changing Star had been doing for the Dreamer Army... then, Sunny still had a chance.

Chapter 326: Siege of the Crimson Spire (12)

Glancing at the graceful figure of Saint, Sunny gritted his teeth and made a difficult decision.

He had no choice but to do it. Too much depended on his success.

A moment later, he feinted an attack and jumped back at the last moment, disengaging from the three menacing coral golems instead. At the same time, he sent the Shadow a mental command.

The taciturn demon froze for a fraction of a second, as though hesitating. But in the end, she did not.

Abandoning the measured cadence of her flawless technique, Saint allowed the spear of the Hunter to strike her in the chest. The force of that vicious attack was so immense that her onyx armor shattered, allowing the tip of the spear to bite deep into her stonelike flesh. Soon, a stream of ruby dust flowed out of the wound, painting the broken cuirass red.

But the Shadow did not pay it any attention. Catching the shaft of the spear with her shield hand, she twisted her torso and flung the towering coral golem away.

And then, she suddenly dashed to the side.

Before the terrible creatures could understand what was happening, she closed the distance and descended upon the three abominations attacking Sunny. Even though her attack was swift unexpected, they managed to react to it at the last moment. The obsidian steel of her dark sword was met by weapons made of crimson coral.

It gave Sunny the second he needed to get past them, nevertheless.

Dodging the hand of the Priestess, he appeared behind the three golems and ran toward the distant figure of the Lord.

Behind him, Saint challenged all six of the golems, tying the down with a ferocious onslaught of attacks. She paid dearly to buy him time, however. Just a second later, another attack got past her defense, leaving a deep crack on the black armor. And then another, and another...

Ruby dust flowed down like blood.

With a terrible grimace contorting his pale face, Sunny rushed to reach the seventh of the Star Sigil guardians.

Kai approached the dark mass of broken flesh and groaning iron wires, feeling cold drops of blood fall on his face. Changing the angle of his flight to move parallel to the ground, he clenched his teeth and lashed out with his sword.

The heavy blade of the falcata collided with the iron wires and easily sliced them apart. This net was created from the same thin metal as the webs of iron spiders. As such, it couldn't resist the sharpness of his weapon Memory, which was elevated almost to the Ascended Rank by the miraculous Crown of Dawn.

His hand, however, wasn't as strong. Even with his core brimming with soul essence, Kai was still just a Sleeper. As soon as he struck the net, a sharp pain pierced his wrist.

He screamed, but did not let the sword fall from his hand.

'Almost...'

As a long cut appeared on the net, many corpses fell down through the breach. Kai had chosen the target for his attack carefully, making sure that the rain of dead Nightmare Creatures would fall on the empty stretch of crimson coral between the largely intact line of archers and the remnants of the vanguard, which was embroiled in horrifying melee.

But this was not enough. The number of dropping corpses was too small to relieve the pressure from the crumbling net.

Dashing through the air, Kai made a turn and flew back. A few moments later, he delivered another strike. A second cut appeared on the net, crisscrossing the first one.

With a strange and melodic noise, four triangular sections of the net collapsed, creating a wide funnel through which a flood of bleeding carcasses fell. Even more slowly rolled in the newly formed depression, finally allowing sunlight back onto the battlefield.

And through that breach, he saw the sky once again.

Most of the flying Nightmare Creatures had been slain by the archers, with just a few still trying fruitlessly to break through the net. But high above them, five dark dots still circled in the clouds.

As soon as Kai saw them, a cold shiver ran through his body.

Because it felt as though they saw him, too.

A moment later, the Messengers broke the perfect symmetry of their circle and plunged down.

'No!'

Kai's eyes widened.

Dashing through the breach, he dismissed his Aspect Ability and allowed inertia to pull him down. A moment later, he landed on the carpet of dead monsters and desperately looked for arrows sticking from the bodies.

Tearing one, two, three... five of them from the flesh of the Nightmare Creatures, he simultaneously summoned his bow. He would have gathered more, but there was no more time.

As soon as his bow weaved itself from sparks of light, Kai pushed himself off the carpet of carcasses and shot upward. Then, he looked up.

The five terrifying Spire Messengers were descending upon him, wind whistling through their gruesome black feathers. Hunger and madness were burning in their eyes.

For some reason, it felt as though the heavens themselves were falling on him.

Flying toward the Fallen Monsters, Kai desperately drew his bow and send an arrow in their direction... then two, three, four, and finally five.

At that point, the Messengers were close enough to see every detail of their repulsive pale bodies.

The arrows Kai shot were mundane ones, and thus unable to do much damage to these harrowing abominations.

...Unless aimed perfectly by a master of the bow.

All five struck the base of one of the Messenger's wings, damaging it enough to send the vile creature crashing down, out of control.

Kai dodged to the side, missing the second one by just a few meters.

The third one was now right above him, its beak opening in a gluttonous glee.

That was when Kai made his sixth shot. Only this time, the arrow he sent flying was not mundane at all.

It was the Blood Arrow.

The hideous black Memory streaked through the air and hit the Messenger right in the eye, sinking in so deep that only its fletching remained seen. The terrible monster suddenly convulsed, and then fell down.

The melodious voice of the Spell sang into Kai's ear:

[You have slain a Fallen Monster, Cursed...]

But he had no time to listen to it.

Using the body of the creature he had just killed as a shield, Kai evaded the attack of the fourth Messenger.

But the last one...

The last one suddenly appeared right in front of him, leaving Kai no path to retreat, no hope of saving himself.

It was too late.

The terrifying black beak shot forward.

Effie did her best. She really, really did.

But in the end, there was only so much that a person could endure.

After an eternity of refusing to give up, covered in terrible wounds, she made a mistake. It wasn't a mistake, even.

Just the inevitable failure of a body put through too much pain.

After delivering another lethal blow, she tried to dodge an attacking monster, but at the most crucial moment, her mauled leg suddenly buckled.

With a short yell, Effie stumbled and fell to the ground.

The creature didn't give her a chance to stand up again. It jumped atop the huntress, pressing her into the ground. All she had time to do was grab the jaws of the monster to prevent them from closing on her head.

Effie wanted to throw the heavy abomination off her, but a moment later, another jumped on it, its mandibles biting into her shoulder. And then another, and another, and another.

Soon, she was buried under a crushing pile of frenzied Nightmare Creatures, sharp teeth sinking into her flesh.

'Hurts... it hurts so much...'

Effie gritted her teeth, remembering...

What it was like, to see that distant, pure light.

Chapter 327: Sieae of the Crimson Spire (13)

At the last moment, the coral golem moved, disappearing from Sunny's view. A fraction of a second later, it materialized a few steps away, just outside of the Midnight Shard's reach.

'...Bastard!'

It was too late to change the direction of his attack. Pulled forward and down by the inertia, Sunny was forced to finish his downward slash and stumbled, falling to one knee. He found himself in a dangerous position, wide open for an attack and with little ability to maneuver.

The perverse simulacrum of the Lord towered above him, his powerful frame radiating a sense of harrowing strength. On the forehead of the artificial creature, a polished piece of coral shined with intense crimson light.

That light seemed to sap the life from everything it fell upon.

Feeling a sudden weakness permeate his body, Sunny gritted his teeth and dashed to the side. A split second later, the fist of the Lord pierced the air with a cracking sound and shattered the ground, sending a rain of debris flying in every direction.

Twisting his body, Sunny spun and delivered a backhanded blow before his feet even touched the ground. The blade of the tachi scraped against the vambrace of the golem's armor, leaving a dip gash in it.

However, it didn't do a lot of damage.

Landing and sliding back on the coral, Sunny thrust his hand forward and send the Moonlight Shard flying at the golem's face. The creature easily swatted it away with its hand.

By the time it did, however, Sunny was already near, delivering a high thrust with the Midnight Shard. As soon as the Lord moved to deflect the

austere blade, he changed the direction of his attack and turned it into a vicious horizontal cut.

Using every last bit of his finesse and prowess, Sunny brought down a rain of strikes on the golem. He was moving with astonishing speed and agility, his attacks and steps seamlessly flowing from one into another. It was as though the whole onslaught was just one fluid, continuous motion.

But no matter how swift and skilled he was, it all turned out to be useless.

The Lord was much faster, stronger, and more powerful. Even though he was temporarily forced to concentrate on nothing but defense, every second that passed spelled doom for Sunny.

Because somewhere behind him, Saint was being slowly destroyed by the six other golems. And as soon as she fell, he was going to die.

"Curse you!"

Pausing for a mere moment, Sunny gave the coral abomination a chance to attack. Its fist shot toward his chest with terrifying speed.

Turning his torso, Sunny avoided the blow and caught the hand of the golem between his body and his arm. This position didn't give him any advantage, because the creature was much stronger than him.

On the contrary, it immobilized one of his hands and forced him to let go of the hilt of the Midnight Sword with the other.

...But it gave Sunny purchase.

The Lord raised his second fist, ready to crush the human's skull with one deadly strike.

High in the skies above the battlefield, Kai was just moments away from death. He had wounded one of the Messengers, killed another, and avoided two more.

But the last one was now upon him, and there was no escape.

Time seemed to slow down. With his eyes opened wide in terror, he stared at the swiftly approaching beak of the harrowing creature. No matter how fast Kai was, he knew that this time, he wouldn't be able to evade his end.

If only he had one more second! A fraction of a second, even...

Fully aware that it was hopeless, Kai changed the direction of his flight. Despite it all, he had to at least try.

But it was hopeless.

Until...

At the last moment, something flashed through the air and collided with the black beak of the Messenger, throwing it slightly off course. That gave Kai the fraction of a second he was praying for.

Twisting his body, he allowed the beak to pass mere centimeters away from it, crashed into the side of the Messenger and bounced off of it, then stumbled away through the clouds.

A slender, graceful rapier suddenly appeared by his side and then circled around him, cutting a stray black locust in half. With its pommel facing Kai and its tip aimed at anyone who would dare to attack him, the Quiet Dancer glided through the air, forming a defensive sphere of sharp steel around the young man.

Despite its inanimate nature, the flying rapier somehow managed to convey the feeling of mean, arrogant, and bad-tempered protectiveness.

Staring at the elegant Echo, Kai couldn't help but smile.

'Thank you, Cassie...'

On the bloodsoaked battlefield, a small hill of monsters was moving and shifting, every horrifying creature in it lusting to taste the flesh of the person buried beneath.

It seemed as though there was no hope.

But what was hope? Hope was something that Effie had abandoned long ago.

She didn't need it.

All she needed was a roof over her head, delicious food on her plate, and the thrill of the hunt. The indescribable pleasure of being healthy, strong, and living.

With a tiny bit of misguided pride mixed in to spice things up.

He wasn't willing to die yet, not like this, not without giving it one last fight...

Suddenly, a muffled sound resounded from under the hill of monsters. It was a furious growl, full of rage, defiance, and a desperate will to survive. A moment later, the hill shuddered.

And then exploded, bodies of Nightmare Creatures flying away and rolling on the ground.

Straining her muscles to the point where it felt like they were about to explode, and then past that, Effie pushed the incredible weight away with her mighty shoulders and emerged from the seething mass of abominations.

She was still holding the jaws of the first creature to jump on her with her bleeding hands. With a ruthless motion, she tore them apart and threw the broken body aside. Her fist flashed through the air, crushing someone's skull.

Effie had lost the Zenith Shard somewhere, but it didn't matter anymore. With a bestial growl, she spun and fought, killing one monster after another with her bare hands.

She was not going to surrender. She was not going to back down. She was not going to...

After a while, no one was there to attack her anymore. Effie didn't know why.

To be honest, by then, she couldn't see much. Her vision was blurry, and slowly growing dark.

Met with the lack of resistance, she staggered and fell to her knees. She tried to draw in a breath, but something was blocking her throat, and something was wrong with her lungs. She couldn't.

'This... is... the end, I guess...'

Through the blurry dark fog, Effie suddenly saw a radiant figure approach.

She smiled.

'Is that you, Princess? Ah, I hate to admit it... but I... don't... think... I can...'

It was getting hard to form thoughts. Effie sighed, then closed her eyes, ready to give in to the comfort of oblivion.

But then, two cool hands softly touched her face, and purifying white flames rolled through her body, bringing the pain and the agony away.

Sunny was entangled with the Lord, the abomination's hand trapped between his arm and his body. The golem didn't seem to care about it that much, however. Instead, it raised his other fist and prepared to deliver the final blow.

Before he had the chance to do so, however, Sunny's empty hand shot forward.

Grabbing the shining piece of crimson coral with his fingers, he strained for a fraction of a second.

And then tore it from the creature's forehead.

The polished gem came out of the coral flesh of the terrible creature, dragging countless red threads with it. Sunny pulled as hard as he could and then twisted his hand, forcing the red strings to snap.

Something cracked inside the menacing Lord's body, and he suddenly staggered.

Without wasting this opportunity, Sunny released the golem's hand, raised the Midnight Shard high above his head, and then delivered a devastating downward slash.

The blade of the tachi collided with the crimson coral and shattered it, turning the towering figure of the Lord into a rain of crumbling shards.

Chapter 328: Siege of the Crimson Spire (14)

Left on the top of the tall mound of crimson coral, Cassie stood alone in the darkness.

Now that the Quiet Dancer had left her side, she was back to her previous self.

Lost.

Weak.

Frightened.

Utterly helpless.

The oppressive nothingness surrounded her from all sides.

But that nothingness was full of sound.

It swelled with the deafening cacophony of the nightmare horde's onslaught. Cassie heard howls, growling, inhuman screams, shrieks, and the scraping of chitin.

She heard the clangor of steel and the sound of flesh being ripped apart.

She also heard countless human voices calling out to any kind of deity that could save them. Full of fury, agony, bravery, fear, resolve, sorrow, strength, helplessness, hope, faith, despair, disbelief.

She heard them dying.

Standing above it all, Cassie shivered. She wanted to press her hands against her ears, but didn't.

...Her terrible vision was coming true.

And she was back to being lost in the darkness.

Just like before. Worse than before. Almost like on that first day in this cursed, forsaken, lightless land.

In this forgotten hell.

Back then, she had found herself stranded on a similar mound of coral. Only what surrounded her was the dark sea and not a horde of Nightmare Creatures.

But Cassie didn't know that. She didn't know where she was, and what was hiding in the boundless darkness. She only knew that she was alone, and helpless.

That she was going to die in that lonesome, cold nothingness.

She had given up. Sitting down on the hard coral, she hugged her knees and tried not to cry. Abandoned and forgotten, she waited for death.

But instead of death, a cold and indifferent voice came out of the darkness:

"...What are you doing?"

That was how she met Nephis, who saved and protected her ever since. Without even asking anything in return, not before, and not after learning of what Cassie's Aspect was able to do.

Just because she wanted to.

Nephis brought her out of the darkness and destroyed the bitter, all-encompassing prison of her loneliness. How was Cassie supposed to ever repay that debt?

And then, she met Sunny. Sweet Sunny, who pretended to be callous and cruel, but was actually caring and kind.

And then, she had to make a choice.

...And now, she had to live with that choice.

Or die with it...

As Cassie stood, listening to the sounds of slaughter, a sudden gust of wind rustled her beautiful blond hair.

She flinched, and slowly turned to face the wind.

A moment later, her face paled, and her lips moved slightly.

'No!'

Left alone, away from the battle and anyone who could have heard her, Cassie closed her eyes and whispered into the nothingness:

"A storm... there is a storm..."

The Dreamer Army became much smaller, but still held on. In fact, it was slowly pushing the horde of the Nightmare Creatures back.

As the line of archers ran out of arrows and ammunition, those who had no suitable Memories to replace them summoned their melee weapons and joined the vanguard, reinforcing its dwindling numbers. The Artisans had done the same, abandoning their siege engines and throwing themselves into the crucible of combat.

The nightmare horde, meanwhile, had depleted its seemingly endless reserve of fresh bodies. With no more abominations crossing the bridges of crimson coral and lunging forward to join the massacre, its mass was slowly growing thinner.

With Changing Star serving as the unassailable core of the human formation and rallying fighters around her, with Effie stalling the entire horde to give the rest of the humans time to mend the breaches in their defense lines, for a few minutes, the flow of the battle froze in fragile balance.

The two opposing forces seemed to finally be evenly matched.

All it would have taken for the humans to turn that balance in their favor was one last furious push.

"Come on! Hold strong!"

"Lit yourself on fire!"

"Follow the Immortal Flame!"

As several people yelled, feeling that the fate of this battle was about to be decided, a gust of wind suddenly blew over the battlefield, bringing with it the smell of salt.

The light dimmed slightly.

Looking west, they suddenly stumbled and froze for a few moments. Their faces became as white as snow.

...Behind the Crimson Spire, an impenetrable wall of darkness was slowly devouring the world. It was approaching the battlefield with terrifying speed, numerous bolts of lightning illuminating its furious depths.

A storm was coming.

As it drew closer and closer, the surface of the black water that swirled around the island of the cyclopean tower suddenly trembled.

And then, it began to crawl upward.

First slowly, and then faster and faster, the black whirlpool swelled and moved forward, swallowing the crimson coral meter after a meter, its dark vastness rising and seething.

The cursed sea was coming to devour the Forgotten Shore.

The monsters that guarded the Crimson Spire, however, did not react in the same way as the usual Nightmare Creatures would have.

Instead of scurrying away to find shelter, they howled and shrieked in eerie triumph, and then crashed into the Dreamer Army with renewed fury.

Expressions of terror and despair appeared on people's faces. But there was nowhere to retreat, nowhere to run.

All they could do was stand and fight.

Even when the ground beneath their feet became slippery and slick, covered by a thin film of black water.

Even when the water continued rising.

[You have slain an awakened...]

[Your shadow...]

[You have received a...]

Spinning as soon as the remains of the Lord crumbled to the ground, Sunny dashed toward the remaining six golems to reinforce the heavily damaged Saint.

He didn't listen to the Spell, picking up only one piece of information from her words: the coral golems were of the Awakened rank.

...Made sense.

Just as a Fallen Tyrant was not supposed to be able to create minions of the same Rank, a Fallen Terror was most likely not capable of such feat either.

Previously, the coral constructs were fast and powerful enough to make Sunny think that they were Fallen creatures. But it was just the effect of the profane gem burning in the Lord's forehead.

Just like the Dawn Shard was able to elevate Awakened Memories to the boundary of the Ascended rank, so had the Lord enhanced his fellow

abominations, bringing their power close to that of the Fallen.

But now that he was destroyed, the augmentation disappeared with him.

Sunny was confident in his ability to finish off six awakened Nightmare Creatures... for the most part.

As he ran, a strong gust of wind suddenly hit him in the back, almost making Sunny stumble.

'What the hell...'

Throwing a glance over his shoulders, he stared at the skies, his eyes widening.

An endless wall of darkness crashed into the Crimson Spire and swallowed it, painting the whole world black.

Stunned, Sunny gritted his teeth and turned away from it, a cold feeling of dread permeating his entire body.

'...Curse it all!'

Chapter 329: Siege of the Crimson Spire (15)

In front of him, Saint was barely holding on to life. Her armor was broken and painted red by the crimson dust that flowed from a dozen terrible wounds. The visor of the helmet was shattered, together with the side of her face. One of her ruby eyes was missing, replaced by a jagged black hole.

As he ran, a vicious blow of the Knight's sword got past the Shadow's defense and bit into her shield arm, severing it at the elbow.

Saint staggered and awkwardly lashed out with her sword. Then, she took a step back and fell heavily to one knee.

The menacing figures of the golems towered above her, approaching to deliver the final blow. The war hammer of the Builder rose, ready to fall down like a herald of destruction. The spear of the Hunter flew forward like a hungry predator.

The Shadow slightly tilted her head and faced her death. Her eerily beautiful alabaster face was calm and indifferent. The weapons of the profane constructs reflected in her one remaining eye, growing larger and larger as they drew closer.

...But in the end, all they managed to pierce was emptiness.

The wounded Saint dissipated into shadows, summoned back into the nurturing black flames of Sunny's core at the last second.

In the next moment, a wall of darkness swallowed the empty space in front of the Crimson Spire, bringing with it pelting rain and hurricane winds.

The storm was now upon them.

The six golems lingered for a few seconds, staring into the raging expanse of the terrifying tempest. They were submerged into its darkness, with only a rare flash of lightning illuminating the world. The wall of rain was so thick that it was almost impossible to see anything through it.

Suddenly, they discerned a hint of a movement to their left and swiftly turned, ready to attack the enemy. However, there was no one there.

A moment later, though, one of them suddenly shuddered, and then crumbled to the ground, its head flying off into the darkness. The flash of the blade that had decapitated it was so swift and unexpected that none of them had time to react.

It also came from the wrong direction.

The golems spun and raised their weapons... but instead of an enemy, all they saw was a heavy kunai appearing from the wall of darkness and hitting one of them in the neck.

The blow was powerful enough to make the golem stagger, but not that dangerous. The wounded abomination simply raised its hand and tore the dagger out of its coral flesh.

As it did, however, the figure of the Slayer that stood behind the rest of the golems suddenly fell to her knees. A moment later, her head slowly slid from her neck and tumbled down, revealing a perfect, smooth cut.

Sunny, who hid in the darkness, bared his teeth in a vicious grin.

'This is my domain, wretches. You are my guests now...'

Two dead, four to go.

Realizing that their enemy was capable of hiding in the shadows and seeing in the dark, the golems changed their tactic. The Knight, the Stranger, and the Hunter shifted to stand in a circle, protecting the Priestess with their bodies.

The Priestess, meanwhile, raised her hands to the skies.

In the next moment, a blinding light shot into every direction from her open palms, revealing Sunny, who had been just a few meters away from them and preparing to launch another attack.

'...Damnation.'

On the bloody battlefield, the remains of the Dreamer Army were besieged from all sides. They continued to fight with doomed determination, abandoning all fear and doubt. Even though the black water was already high enough to reach their knees, the humans continued to resist the horde of the frenzied Nightmare Creatures, slaying three for every one of them killed by the terrifying abominations.

Illuminating by the radiant light of Changing Star, not one of them tried to run.

Instead, they stalwartly stood their ground and fought. Some were smiling, and some were even singing.

...As more and more of them fell, forever disappearing under the cold surface of the cursed sea, the black water kept rising.

High in the skies above the battlefield, Kai and the Quiet Dancer were flying through the nets of lightning, dodging the attacks of three relentless Spire Messengers. The terrible monsters were infinitely faster and more powerful than the two of them, but had to rely on their wings to propel their massive bodies through the air.

Both Kai and his graceful defender flew thanks to magical abilities, and as such, could maneuver better than the winged abominations. This was the only reason why there were still alive.

As Kai dodged and evaded the onslaught of deadly attacks, he pelted the Messengers with precise shots of his bow. However, none were as lucky as his first one: the black arrow bit into the flesh of the powerful monsters again and again, drinking their blood, but all that achieved was slowing them down a bit.

But he didn't care. He never hoped to defeat the harrowing heralds of the Spire, to begin with. He just wanted to keep them away from the people fighting on the ground...

For as long as he could.

Flying through the storm, struggling against the crushing pressure of the wind and dodging bolts of lightning, Kai gritted his teeth and kept doing just that.

...Not pausing even for a second after his position was revealed, Sunny lunged forward and delivered a swift thrust, aiming at the closest golem — the Knight. The creature moved, deflecting the blade of the Midnight Shard with a coral parody of the noble weapon.

Now that the Lord was destroyed, the artificial creatures became considerably less fast and strong. They were no better than carapace scavengers, or maybe centurions...

Barely more powerful than Sunny himself, thanks to the shadow.

However, they were just monsters, while he was something much more deadly.

A kid from the outskirts who spent a whole year fighting for his life in the depths of hell.

He had the skill, the clarity, and the murderous will of a human.

Allowing the Midnight Shard to slide along the blade of his enemy's sword, Sunny made a step forward and raised his hands. The tachi changed its angle and then easily moved past the Knight's defenses, piercing his neck. One twist, and it flew out of the golem's flesh, disintegrating half of his neck in the process.

Continuing the motion, Sunny slammed his fist and the hilt of the Midnight Shard into the golem's face with enough force to break the remaining half.

[You have slain...]

Using the grounded footwork that he had learned in the countless spars with the Shadow Saint, he quickly repositioned himself and blocked the attack of the Hunter's spear. The Stranger was still trying to move past the Priestess to join the fight — Sunny had planned to use this to his advantage from the start.

Before his current opponent could react, Sunny delivered a deadly counterattack, cutting off one of his arms. A moment later, he pulled the tachi back, thrust it forward, piercing the Hunter through the chest, and then pulled it up, cutting the cursed creature apart.

[You have slain an awakened...]

The Priestess lunged forward, wishing to rip him apart with her bare hands, but was suddenly pulled back by the invisible string that had wrapped itself around her neck at some point in the fight.

That was all the time Sunny required.

As pieces of coral fell to the ground, the Spell spoke once again:

[You have...]

With the Priestess dead, the Stranger was left in the darkness once again. He hesitated and raised his shield, looking at the spot where the enemy had been just a second ago and listening to the sound of water through the roaring storm.

However, in the next second, something rustled behind him. The Stranger spun and delivered a wide horizontal slash with his sword, but then paused, staring down.

His sword hand was gone, cut cleanly at the wrist.

Then, something flushed through the rain and streaked across his body. The golem staggered, and then fell down, crumbling into halves as it fell.

Breathing heavily, Sunny lowered the Midnight Shard and looked at the six piles of crimson coral that were disappearing beneath the black water in front of him. Then, he spat.

"Who told you that you can hurt my Shadow, bastards?"

Turning around, he saw a bolt of lightning hit the gargantuan gates of the Crimson Spire. Arcs of electricity danced on its stone surface and then dissipated, leaving a ghostly afterglow in their wake.

Only the shapes of the seven stars continued to shine, as though full of energy.

Clutching his burning chest, Sunny looked at the black water that was already up to his knees and headed toward the Spire.

Chapter 330: siege of the Crimson Spire (16)

As the Dreamer Army was drowning in the rising waters of the cursed sea and the insatiable tide of monsters, Sunny approached the crimson tower.

Far away from the rest of them, completely alone, submerged in roaring darkness, he struggled against the seething mass of black waves and the hurricane winds to cross the last few meters that separated him from the shining star sigil engraved into its gates.

Finally, his hand touched the cold surface of the ancient stone. Wiping the rainwater off his pale face, Sunny stared at the radiant shapes of the seven stars.

'This better work...'

Summoning the first of the Oauth Keys, he lingered for a moment, and then carefully inserted it into the black chasm of the keyhole.

Separated from him by the vast expanse of the swelling sea of darkness, the surviving Sleepers desperately fought the advancing horde of monsters. The black water had already reached their waists, making it hard to move. The army was trying to retreat up the slope of the crimson coral, but the pursuing sea was much faster than them.

Changing Star was still slaying one monster after another, her radiance only growing brighter in the tenebrous hell of the furious storm. Raindrops were evaporating as they touched her brilliant skin, its incandescence making even arching bolts of lightning seem pale and bleak.

...Suddenly, an almost imperceptible ripple ran across the surface of the black water. A gust of cold wind blew over the Forgotten Shore, sending a shiver running through the hearts of countless creatures.

Moving on to the next star, Sunny summoned the second key and put it into the lock. Nothing terrible happened, so he struggled through the water to reach the third one.

'Terrible... what would that even look like? What can be more terrible than my current situation?'

As if to answer his question, somewhere behind him, a black tentacle suddenly rose out of the seething waves and blindly whipped through the air. Crashing into a mount of coral, it easily shattered it. A rain of debris fell into the water.

Just a moment later, countless others followed the first one.

Noticing this new development through the eyes of his shadow, Sunny cursed.

'Me and my big damn mouth!'

Luckily, the tentacles were some distance away, somewhere near the remains of the seven golems he had slain. But as the sea rose, they started slowly moving in his direction.

Hurriedly inserting the third key, Sunny dashed to the fourth star. Another Oath Key slid into its lock.

The water was now even higher, forcing him to struggle against its weight. A strong gust of wind hit Sunny in the back, almost causing him to crash headfirst into the stone gates.

As he put the fifth key into the keyhole, the tentacles were already alarmingly close.

'Curse it all!'

Sunny inserted the sixth Oath Key into the lock and dove into the black water, swimming toward the last one.

Just a few moments before the mass of twisting tentacles descended on him, he found the last shining star and drove the seventh key into its center.

Suddenly, the world shuddered.

The whole Forgotten Shore trembled.

Out on the battlefield, the surviving humans froze for a second, startled by the sudden change that rippled through the world.

The furious onslaught of the wind died down. The torrential flood of rain stopped. The continuous, deafening roar of the thunderstrikes grew quiet.

The terrible storm seemed to have ended as suddenly as it had appeared, dissipating into nothingness like a fragile mirage.

Even the Nightmare Creatures attacking them stumbled and paused for a moment, staring at the sky.

...And then, the dark veil of clouds was broken by a blindingly bright ray of sunlight.

As soon as it happened, the restless black water stopped rising, and then flowed in reverse.

The cursed sea was retreating.

"Crap!"

As soon as Sunny put the last Oath Key into the seventh lock, the whole Crimson Spire shuddered. An indescribable sound came from its depths, echoing through the darkness of the storm like a heavy, mournful sigh.

And then, the gargantuan gates opened. The giant slabs of ancient stone moved for the first time in thousands of years...

...The problem was, the gates opened outward, slamming into Sunny and dragging him through the mass of black water with terrible speed. The unexpected blow threw him off his feet and almost caused him to drown. Not to mention the fact that it hurt like hell.

The opening gate brought him away from the damned tentacles, at least.

After a while, Sunny was thrown onto the slope of a tall coral mound. Coughing a few times, he tiredly crawled a few meters up, then fell on the rough surface of the coral and turned around.

What Sunny saw made him blink, then open his eyes wide and stare in disbelief.

The dark sea was being sucked into the Spire.

The black water was flowing in reverse, rushing into the enormous doorway. The twisting tentacles and the harrowing creature they belonged to were carried away by that current, disappearing into that blackness, too.

The strange thing was, the amount of water entering the Crimson Spire was much larger than what should have been possible. Sunny expected to see it fill the cyclopean tower, but instead, it simply flowed inside and seemed to... disappeared.

As if swallowed by the Spire and banished into the depths of the earth.

Just a few moments later, the lever of the dark sea began to fall.

The storm died down, and the impenetrable veil of clouds was torn apart, allowing sunlight to illuminate the world once again.

And in a few minutes...

The cursed sea was no more.

Sunny stared at the clear surface of the crimson coral, which had been covered by the black waves not too long ago.

The bottomless dark ocean was gone without a trace. Even the black whirlpool that had surrounded the island was not there anymore, revealing a deep, uneven, empty semblance of a moat.

Then, Sunny stared at the sky, where a furious white sun was hovering right above the tip of the Crimson Spire.

A stunned thought entered his mind...

'Did we... did we do it?'

...Did he actually destroy the dark sea?

Chapter 331: Siege of the Crimson Spire (17)

The dark sea was gone.

And all the horrors that dwelt in its cursed depths were gone with it, too.

The world was bathed in pure sunlight. The surface of the Labyrinth suddenly became vibrant and bright, with stark shadows hiding under the jagged pillars of the crimson coral. The furious white sun burned above the Crimson Spire, as if frozen in the middle of the sky.

Sunny even had to cover his eyes for a few seconds.

Laying on the ground, he allowed himself a few moments of rest. A short laugh escaped from his lips.

'I actually did it?'

Speak about the unlikely events...

Unfortunately, he couldn't really rest yet.

The battle wasn't over. The horde of Nightmare Creatures was not defeated yet.

...And somewhere in the Spire, the Crimson Terror itself was not defeated, either.

With a deep sigh, Sunny collected himself and rose to his feet. They were almost there. They almost escaped. Now, all that was left was to make one final push. Even if it was going to be the hardest one yet...

Looking at the tall mound of coral towering above him, he squinted against the light and began climbing it.

Was it always so bright?

As Sunny climbed, he summoned the runes and glanced at them.

Shadows: [Marble Saint].

'Thank gods.'

He knew that Saint was alright, but still wanted to check. The taciturn demon had been heavily damaged and was bound to spend a long time restoring herself, however, her existence was not in danger.

Then, his eyes slid lower:

Shadow Fragments: [999/1000].

'...Crap.'

Sunny gritted his teeth. He was simultaneously excited and scared to find out what was going to happen once he saturated the Shadow Core. It was bound to be beneficial, but at what cost?

Would he go into a slumber for several weeks, as Saint had? Or suddenly become incapacitated amidst furious combat, as Nephis had been after defeating Gunlaug?

That could cost him his life...

'Not like I can do anything about it now.'

Full of unease, he continued his climb and soon reached the very top of the coral pillar. Standing on it, Sunny looked in the direction of the Dreamer Army.

Something wet suddenly fell on his hand. Looking down, he saw a drop of blood rolling off his skin. A moment later, another fell on the vambrace of the Puppeteer's Shroud.

Surprised, Sunny raised his hand and swiped it across his upper lip. It came away wet with blood.

'...A nose bleed? What the hell?'

Come to think of it, why did he feel so weak?

As Sunny stared at his hand in confusion, a violent ripple suddenly ran through his shadow.

Across the deep moat that surrounded the island, the remnants of the Dreamer Army were at the precipice of turning the tide of battle in their favor.

Just a few minutes ago, they had been drowning in the rising flood of black water and the relentless onslaught of the horde, lost in the fury of a cataclysmic storm. But now, things were different.

The storm was no more, and the dark sea had retreated. The sun shined brightly in the sky, drowning the battlefield in its light. Bathed in it, the Nightmare Creatures seemed to become hesitant... almost sluggish.

They were not giving up, however. The monsters continued to attack the humans in a frenzied rage, their claws and fangs reaping one life after another. But the survivors of the Dreamer Army were repaying every loss tenfold.

Reinvigorated by the exhilarating gift of sudden salvation, they steeled their hearts and fought with zeal, fervor, and murderous will. More and more Nightmare Creatures fell to their blades, and the horde did not seem to be endless anymore.

The Sleepers did not know why the storm had dissipated and why the cursed sea had retreated, but their faith in Changing Star now burned even brighter. She had promised to guide them out of this hell, and somehow, even the black water had capitulated to her radiant light...

The victory was not impossible anymore. They could practically taste it...

But Nephis herself suddenly stumbled and slowed her sword dance. A confused, alarmed frown appeared on her face. Dodging the claws of an attacking abomination, she thrust her sword into its maw, then jumped back.

Free of the swarming monsters for a few short moments, she lowered her sword.

And looked at the sky.

High above her, Kai was still alive... somehow.

'What is happening?'

He had spent so long flying at a terrible speed, struggling against the crushing wind, dodging bolts of lightning and the cursed Spire Messengers, pushing the limits of both his body and mind... the exhaustion was catching up with him now, making it hard to think.

Let alone react...

He really, really didn't feel well. His whole body ached, and his vision was slowly turning blurry. A sickening feeling of weakness permeated his body.

The storm had come out of nowhere, and then disappeared without a trace. The skies were blindingly bright.

...That was a relief.

But the damn abominations were still there.

At least they didn't look tireless anymore.

In fact, the Messengers seemed to be in as much of a sorry state as Kai himself. He wanted to flatter himself and assume that it was because of his arrows. He had wounded the damned monsters many times, after all...

But no, it didn't make any sense.

They seemed able to resist the effect of the Blood Arrow before, at least to a large extent, so why would it change now?

'Something is wrong...'

Using the sun to blind his enemies, Kai dove into the light and dashed to the side, narrowly avoiding the claws of one of the Messengers. Or so he thought — in reality, it wasn't narrow at all. He dodged it with a lot of room to spare. The Quiet Dancer didn't even need to get involved.

'Are they... growing slower?'

With a sudden feeling of unease, Kai hesitated for a split second, and then reduced his speed to take a good look at the terrifying creature.

What he saw made him scowl.

The Messenger looked... wrong.

Its glassy black eyes were erratic and senseless. They were seeping with blood, which flowed down the black feathers like a crimson stream. There were two other similar streams, coming from the monster's ears. The muscles of his pale body were spasming, rolling under the white skin like panicking worms.

As Kai watched, the Messenger suddenly opened its beak in a silent scream. A moment later, a flood of blood erupted out of it and dispersed in the wind like red mist.

Then, the creature convulsed one last time and lost control of its wings. Not even trying to correct itself, the terrible abomination plunged down.

Kai flinched and opened his eyes wide in terror.

...The Spire Messenger was dead.

Chapter 332: siege of the Crimson Spire (18)

Sunny swayed a little, and then looked down at his shadow.

The shadow seemed to be in pain. It was slumped, clutching at its chest with one hand and waving at him with the other. When it noticed that Sunny was staring at it, it desperately pointed to itself.

'What... what is this guy trying to say?'

Was he having a heart attack? No, of course not. That would be ridiculous. Shadows didn't have hearts...

What was it pointing at, then?

Sunny scowled.

The shadow was his reflection. So maybe it was not pointing at its own heart, but at his.

But his heart felt fine. What else was there to point at?

Suddenly, his eyes widened.

The Soul Core. The Soul Core usually overlapped over a human's heart...

With a shudder, Sunny dove into the Soul Sea.

Instead of the usual peace and quiet, he was met by ominous chaos. The dark waters that were always tranquil and still were now restless and turbulent. They rippled and surged, as though under the assault of the invisible winds.

Up above, the spheres of light that represented his Memories shimmered and blinked, as if about to be extinguished. The black sun of the Shadow Core was trembling. He could almost see tiny cracks appear on its transparent surface.

Only the silent shadows were still the same, not disturbed by the approaching disaster at all. They stood motionlessly, staring at him with no expression on their black, lifeless faces.

Sunny did not pay them any attention and stared at the Shadow Core with wide eyes, dumbfounded.

'...Soul damage. I am receiving soul damage.'

He was under the effect of a continuous soul attack.

Escaping the unquiet sea in panic, Sunny wiped the blood off his face and looked around with a grim expression. He was even paler than usual.

'What the hell is attacking me?'

After a few moments, he suddenly shivered, stunned by a chilling revelation. And then looked up, at the blinding discus of the sun.

...He had not been wrong. Its light was indeed much brighter than it had been before.

The skies of the Forgotten Shore, which had always been grey, were now almost white, full of merciless heat and radiance. It looked as though someone had erased reality itself, leaving behind nothing but an endless white void. With each second, it was growing more and more incandescent.

'The sun...'

The source of the soul attack was not a Nightmare Creature.

It was sunlight itself.

Anywhere it reached, the souls of living creatures were being slowly eroded and destroyed. And since the sun was now directly above them, at high noon, there was almost nowhere where it couldn't reach.

There was no escape from it.

Except for...

Turning around, Sunny stared at the opened gates of the Crimson Spire. Behind them, welcoming darkness promised shade and safety. This was the only place where he could hide from the annihilating sun.

'The army!'

Spinning around, he peered across the moat.

Out there on the battlefield, the Nightmare Creatures had stopped their endless onslaught. Now, they were stumbling and swaying, as though drunk. Many had already fallen to the ground, blood streaming from their orifices.

Their souls had been destroyed, and they were dead.

The surviving warriors of the Dreamer Army were staring at them in bewilderment, their distant figures full of both relief and confusion. Sunny wanted to scream, warning them of the terrible danger they were in, but knew that he was too far away for anyone to hear him.

From the tall mound of coral he was standing on, he could see the graceful shining figure in their midst. He knew that Nephis must have figured out what was going on by now.

But she didn't know that the gates of the Spire were open.

'Think, think!'

Sunny lingered for a few seconds, and then raised his hand.

A moment later, a clear ringing of a silver bell spread across the Labyrinth, rolling over the remains of the Dreamer Army.

Far away on the battlefield, Nephis spun and looked in his direction.

'Come on! Come on, Neph!'

Sunny rang the Silver Bell again and waved his hand in the air.

However, there was no need. Changing Star had already moved, thrusting her sword toward the Spire. In the next moment, the Dreamer Army lunged forward. Sleepers were running with all the speed they could muster, following the command of their Lady.

"Yes! Wait... what is she doing?!"

Nephis herself did not follow her soldiers. Instead, she turned around and ran in the opposite direction.

...To the distant pillar of coral that they had left at the start of this mess.

Sunny's heart skipped a bit when he realized that she was going back for Cassie.

But there was nothing he could do to help, not anymore.

'Good luck...'

Jumping down from the mound, he rolled on the ground and ran toward the darkness of the Spire's doorway without looking back.

...However, before Sunny could reach it, he saw something falling down from the skies.

'What the...'

A ragged human figure slammed into the crimson coral and rolled several times before coming to a stop, then remained still. Sunny dashed toward it, quickly recognizing the bright colors of Kai's armor.

To his relief, the charming young man was still alive, if barely conscious. A graceful rapier was worriedly zipping in the air around him, the steel of its blade bleak and devoid of the usual luster.

The two of them must have been high up in the sky when the soul erasure had begun, much closer to its source, and so suffered more than those of

them on the ground.

Not wasting any time, Sunny grabbed Kai by the collar and dragged him toward the opened gates of the Spire. The Quiet Dancer followed.

Soon, the three of them reached the border between light and darkness. Without hesitating even for a second, Sunny dove into the cool shade, made a few steps to get deeper into its shelter, and fell to the ground.

"Ah..."

Only now, protected from the annihilating sunlight by the solid mass of the ancient tower, he realized how terrible his condition had been. But no more. His soul was finally at peace once again, whatever wounds dealt to it already healing.

Kai was still alive, too.

"Lucky bastard."

'Thank gods... uh, I mean — that fool owes me big time now!'

Breathing heavily, he checked on the unconscious archer, then sat down and stared at the blindingly bright landscape outside.

Were the... were the others going to make it?

A few seconds later, something suddenly flashed through the air. It was Caster: falling on his knees near them, he glanced at Sunny with tired eyes and then gently placed an unconscious Sleeper he had carried with him on the ground.

Without saying anything, both of them then turned to the gates of the Spire and looked into the light.

Seconds passed in torturous silence.

...And then, a human silhouette appeared out of the brightness. And then another, and another.

The survivors of the Dreamer Army had reached the island and dashed toward the life-saving darkness of the gargantuan tower. Soon, they crossed the distance separating them from the gates and dove into their shade.

Sunny watched, something sharp moving in his chest.

A torturous eternity later, he finally saw the familiar figure in white armor appear at the doorstep of the colossal structure.

Carrying Cassie, Nephis entered the shadows.

She was the last one to come.

Looking at them and at the small crowd of Sleepers gathered at the border between darkness and light, Sunny was finally able to exhale. They made it.

The battle for the Crimson Spire was over.

Now all they had to do was find the Gateway hidden somewhere inside the ancient tower.

...And survive the wrath of its master.

Chapter 333: In the Belly of the Beast

Sitting on the cold stone floor, Sunny inhaled deeply and looked at the people that surrounded him.

All of them were exhausted, wounded, covered in blood, dirt, barely staying conscious. Their armor was broken and torn, and their faces were deathly pale. They sat on the ground, too tired to move or talk, breathing heavily, and stared down with empty eyes.

There were so few of them left...

But also much more than he had expected.

Around a hundred Sleepers had survived the battle of the Crimson Spire. They were the strongest, the bravest... but mostly, the luckiest warriors of the Dreamer Army. Four-fifths of it had been eviscerated in the slaughter.

Not to mention another five hundred or so that had died during the bloody struggle for the throne of the Bright Castle.

This hundred was all that remained of more than a thousand humans that had been surviving on the Forgotten Shore before Changing Star had arrived in the Dark City like a brilliant omen of disaster. Like a herald of ruinous change.

But Sunny was appalled and horrified as much as he was surprised and elated. He had honestly thought that the number of people who would make it this far was going to be in the single digits.

...Looking around, he searched for familiar faces.

Nephis and Cassie were there, of course. So was Kai. Effie was slumped against a wall, dressed only in her white chiton, which was now torn and painted completely red with blood. Her armor seemed to have been completely destroyed.

Caster was also there, bandaging a shallow wound on his shoulder. Compared to other survivors, he seemed strangely clean. However, his armor was seriously damaged, too. It seemed that even incredible speed had not been enough to avoid the fury of the nightmare horde.

Seishan stood slightly apart from the rest of them, surrounded by a dozen surviving Handmaidens. The beautiful woman was heavily injured, the luster of her skin and sparkling eyes growing bleak and dim. From what Sunny could see, she was barely alive.

He also noticed Aiko, who was sitting on the floor, wiping tears off her delicate face.

But there were also many people whom he did not see.

The scarred hunter who had welcomed them into the outer settlement after their long expedition was dead. So was Park, his nonchalant friend who had been responsible for turning Effie into a folk hero with his tales.

The talkative watchmen who had asked Sunny about his opinion on who could have killed Harus were now dead, too. So was the young man who had thought that talking to Sunny was a headache.

Stev, the ample giant that had been in charge of the Memory Market during Gunlaug's reign, did not make. Perhaps this was why Aiko, his friend, was now silently shedding tears.

Even Gemma, the dauntless leader of the Dark City Hunters, had perished. Sunny did not know what could have killed the seemingly immortal man, but suspected that his last hunt had been a truly terrifying sight to behold. Most of the people Gemma had brought to Changing Star's faction with him were now dead, too.

And so, so many more.

Their absence pressed down on survivors like an unseen weight.

But those who survived had no time for sorrow, at least not now. They weren't free of this nightmare yet.

In fact, there had just entered the very belly of the beast.

Turning away from the hundred Sleepers, Sunny looked into the depths of the Crimson Spire.

Once, the entire tower must have been hollow, but now there were growths of coral everywhere inside. They resembled frozen waterfalls of blood, as if rivers of it had once streamed from the top of the Spire and then suddenly turned solid. Because of that, it was hard to see what hid in the depths of the cyclopic construct. Further away, the interior of the tower was shrouded in the cold darkness.

Lingering for a few moments, Sunny decided not to send his shadow to explore. The Crimson Terror had already proven its ability to hurt the it, so he was unwilling to risk the well-being of his invaluable helper.

Instead, he glanced at Neph.

Changing Star was peering into the growing brightness that drowned the Forgotten Shore. By now, the light of day outside was almost blinding. On her face, there was a strangely thoughtful expression.

As Sunny watched, she turned around and raised her head, looking in the direction of the Spire's tip.

After a while, she frowned, and then faced the surviving humans. Her calm voice echoed in the darkness of the ancient tower:

"It's time to go. Gather your strength. We are almost there!"

The Sleepers looked at her with tired eyes, the light of hope igniting in them with renewed strength. Slowly, they rose to their feet. Those who were relatively fine supported those who were seriously wounded. Those who

had lost consciousness were being carried by their friends or fellow warriors.

Soon, the procession of humans headed deeper into the Spire. Nephis was walking at the front, holding Cassie by the hand. Somehow, Sunny ended up side by side with them.

Looking at the two young women, he wanted to say something, but no words came to his mind. Instead, Neph was the one who spoke.

Glancing at Sunny, she hesitated for a while, and then said:

"Thank you. For ringing that bell. And... for everything."

He looked at her for a long time, and then shrugged.

"There's no need to thank me. We are allies. Are we not?"

She smiled slightly and remained silent after that.

Soon, they passed through the barrier of coral and approached the center of the Spire.

There, the dark sea was imprisoned under an indomitable seal.

In front of them was a vast pool of black water. Its surface was perfectly still and flat, like that of a harrowing mirror made from pure darkness. Although the water was opaque and no one could see how far down that gargantuan well went, Sunny felt as though it was unimaginably deep. He felt that it reached such depths that mere thought of light would be impossible there.

As they watched in solemn silence, a subtle ripple spread across the surface of the imprisoned sea. It was as though it was straining to spill over the edges of the pool and break free. However, the invisible powers that held it down were too mighty to overcome, even for this vast, boundless, inconceivable creature.

Turning away from the eerie black mirror, Sunny peered into the darkness and frowned.

Hidden in the shadows, far away from the light of human lanterns, countless figures were standing motionlessly, staring at them.

Chapter 334: Silver Sword | Shadow Slave

At first, Sunny wanted to shout to warn everyone, but after observing the silent figures for a few moments, he changed his mind.

Hidden in darkness, countless coral golems were staring mindlessly into the distance. They were very similar to the creatures he had fought to get to the Star Sigil, but also different.

Because they weren't copies of ancient heroes... just that of mundane people.

As such, they wouldn't be too dangerous. A single Sleeper could fight dozens with ease, let alone the experienced, powerful warriors of the Dreamer Army. More than that, the golems did not seem to be hostile.

Some of them stood motionlessly, while some aimlessly wandered about. These sad, empty things were even more lifeless than Echoes. He felt that they weren't really creatures, even. Just... physical manifestations of the Crimson Terror's madness, perhaps. A representation of its broken psyche and scattered thoughts.

He was sure that each of these golems represented one of the souls that had been sacrificed to the artificial sun and had once flowed through its vessel, becoming a part of it. Forever.

...There were thousands of them, and even more had to be hidden somewhere out of sight.

Lingering for a bit, Sunny informed Nephis of his discovery. She frowned and glanced into the darkness, then nodded.

"We will be careful."

Now that they had a better understanding of the ground level of the Crimson Spire, it became clear that the Gateway was not on it. To find it, the remains of the Dreamer Army were going to have to ascend higher.

There were no stairs or lifting mechanisms in sight, but luckily, many of the twisting coral pillars were wide enough for several people to walk on them, and not as steep as to make things too difficult. The Sleepers could use them to easily reach the next level.

...However, as soon as Sunny stepped forward, Neph suddenly pulled him back and shouted:

"Everyone, back!"

Just a moment later, a wide ray of blinding light fell from somewhere above and swiped across the interior of the Crimson Spire, annihilating the tranquil darkness.

It didn't take a genius to realize that the ray was imbued with the same soul-destroying property as the deadly beams of sunlight outside... only this one seemed much more powerful.

It was also different. Although its movements were erratic and strange, they were unmistakably aimed at the exhausted mass of human invaders and full of intent.

"Hide in the shadows!"

Swiftly, the Sleepers dove behind growths of coral and pressed themselves against them. A few unfortunate ones lingered for too long and were exposed to the light. They didn't scream or struggle, just fell down to the ground, their lives extinguished in a split moment.

The rest froze, consumed by tense fear.

Sunny found himself leaning against a slightly inclined pillar of coral, Neph and Cassie by his side. Carefully looking out, he saw the deadly beam of light grow dim and dissipate. A moment later, however, several more fell from above, tearing the darkness apart.

But that was not all.

Guided by the light, the mass of coral golems suddenly surged forward, moving toward the place where the Dreamer Army was hiding. Their movements, which were aimless and mindless before, were now full of malevolent will.

'...Crap.'

Turning to Nephis, he summoned the Midnight Shard and asked:

"What now?"

She lingered for a bit, and then said evenly:

"Someone will have to attack the Crimson Terror directly to draw its attention away."

Sunny smiled, feeling a strong sense of déjà vu.

"And who might that be?"

Changing Star sighed and took a step back, summoning her silver sword.

"...Me. It has to be me."

He frowned, feeling very reluctant to say his next words. But in the end, he still couldn't help but say them:

"Are you crazy? That's a Fallen Terror we're talking about!"

Nephis didn't answer, instead looking up, as though trying to discern the source of the blinding rays of annihilating light.

Sunny gritted his teeth and added:

"Alright, whatever. Say someone really needs to distract that thing. But why does it have to be you alone? Because you are the great daughter of the Immortal Flame clan? Don't tell me that you started to believe in your own bullcrap!"

Neph gave him a strange look and then shook her head.

"No. It can only be me because of my sword."

Sunny stared at the silver longsword, confused. A lifetime ago, after their first meeting on the Forgotten Shore, Nephis and Cassie had told him about their Memories. The sword in particular had an extremely rare enhancement...

"I am the only human on the Forgotten Shore who has a Memory that grants them a measure of protection against soul attacks. So I am the only one who can approach the Terror and survive."

It was hard to debate against logic. Still, Sunny was not done voicing his objections... only that Changing Star didn't give him a chance to.

Turning to Cassie, she took the blind girl by the hand and said:

"Cas. Give me your wing cloak."

A few seconds later, the transparent fabric of the Dark Wing appeared on her shoulder. Without wasting any time, she then looked at Sunny.

"Once I'm gone, lead the people to the Gateway. Make sure that everyone escapes."

With that, Nephis bent her knees, and then jumped with all her might. Supported by the enchanted cloak, she shot up with considerable speed, then pushed herself off the pillar of coral and flew into the darkness.

The ray of light swiped in her direction, but Changing Star somehow managed to dodge it, crashed into another coral growth, and launched herself off of it a moment before another annihilating beam of light had reached it.

With most rays now pursuing Nephis as she leaped from one coral pillar to another, ascending higher and higher, the Dreamer Army could once again move.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny glanced at the hundred frightened people and yelled:

"Follow me!"

Chapter 335: Ascent | Shadow Slave

Sunny had never expected to become a leader of anyone, let alone of a hundred desperate people. But now, that was exactly the situation he found himself in.

To add insult to injury, he was really the best person for the job.

Not because of any kind of leadership qualities, but simply for the fact that he could see in the dark. Now that the rays of soul-destroying light were led away by Nephis, he could also let his shadow free and send it forward to explore and search for the Gateway.

So if anyone could guide the remains of the Dreamer Army to it, it was him.

'How the hell...'

Hiding his unease deep inside, Sunny projected nothing but absolute confidence and shouted for everyone to follow him. Surprisingly, the Sleepers did just that without voicing any objections.

'Confidence is easily confused for competence, I guess.'

Of course, the fact that he was affiliated with Changing Star in some capacity helped a lot, even if most people were not completely sure how and to what extent.

Taking Cassie's hand, Sunny dove out of his cover and dashed toward a wide, spiraling coral root that reached high into the darkness above. He could hear the sound of footsteps following him from behind.

The Dreamer Army was on the move once again.

Jumping on the root, Sunny sent the shadow forward and glanced at the approaching sea of coral golems. There was still time.

He ran forward, using the coral growth as stairs. A second later, he yelled:

"Those at the back! Ready your weapons!"

They did so while the first rows of Sleepers followed Sunny up. Almost everyone had time to climb onto the root by the time the first of the golems showed up.

The coral figure stumbled from the darkness, only to be met by a flash of a sword. It crumbled instantly, offering almost no resistance.

But a moment later, several more appeared, and then more, and more.

The Sleepers destroyed the first wave to buy themselves a few moments and then jumped onto the root, then dashed away, soon catching up with the rest of the survivors.

At the head of them, Sunny hesitated for a moment. Thanks to the shadow, he knew that the wide coral growth they were ascending was soon going to twist upward at an almost vertical angle and grow much more narrow.

Luckily, there was another one crossing it just a few meters ahead, separated by a very small gap.

Picking Cassie up, he took a step forward and jumped, landing on the other root, then turned around and moved in the opposite direction to the one they had been going... but still upward.

Behind him, the Sleepers repeated his jump. And down below, the wave of golems was already climbing on the twisting roots to pursue them.

'Damn it. I guess they can climb!'

He ran forward, struggling against the steep incline, then suddenly froze and looked up. There, a few dozen meters away, a wide gallery circled around the empty expanse of the Crimson Spire.

And on it, another mass of golems was surging in the direction of the Dreamer Army. Countless twisted figures were appearing from the chaotic mess of crimson coral and rushing forward, searching for a path to reach

them. Many fell off the edge of the gallery and plunged down, to explode into shards once they hit the floor.

But some fell right on the root he was standing on.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny looked back and noticed a familiar tall figure close by. Effie stared at him tiredly and forced out a smile:

"What is it now?"

He put Cassie on the ground and gently pushed her toward the huntress.

"Take care of her for me, alright?"

Effie waved a hand, letting him know that she got it.

Sunny watched the two of them for a moment, then turned around and summoned the Midnight Shard.

A few seconds later, he reached the first golem and slashed it with his sword. The golem's body offered some resistance, but no more than a mundane creature would. It almost disintegrated under his assault, crumbling easily into a pile of broken coral.

'Not too bad...'

Curiously, the Spell did not congratulate him on the kill. Just as Sunny had suspected, these things were not really living creatures.

That was going to make things a tiny bit easier.

Running past the destroyed construct, Sunny soon approached another one and pushed it off the root with one strike of the Midnight Shard's pommel. The golems were not that dangerous...

At least not in small numbers.

He led the Dreamer Army forward, climbing higher and higher. Every couple of minutes, they would have to leave one root and make use of

another, sometimes moving across stone galleries that were situated here and there on the walls of the Crimson Spire.

At some point, both the vanguard of the human procession and its rear became embroiled in a rolling melee with the sea of coral golems. Those in the middle only had to keep their eyes on the layers of coral and stone structures overhead to make sure that nothing fell on them.

This battle was not too terrible, however. The constructs were slower and weaker than even the mundane humans whose visage they were meant to recreate, not to mention almost completely mindless. Not a single human had fell to their attacks yet.

...That was not to say that surviving the onslaught of countless golems was easy.

Somewhere high above, meanwhile, the flashes of white light slowly turned into one continuous, radiant halo. Nephis was probably already approaching the very pinnacle of the ancient tower. The fact that none of the annihilating rays had returned to attack the Sleepers served as proof that she was still alive, drawing the attention of the Terror away from them.

'Where are you... where are you...'

At the head of the Dreamer Army, Sunny cut through another golem and suppressed a curse.

Where was the damn Gateway?!

...And just he thought that, the shadow finally found what it had been looking for all that time.

Their way back to the real world.

Chapter 336: The Gateway | Shadow Slave

Out there in the darkness, a vast balcony was built into the wall of the tower, reaching almost to the center of the gargantuan structure. On its surface, broken pillars of marble were overgrown by the everpresent streaks of crimson coral. They led to a circular dais, with a wide iron ring submerged into its stone surface.

Around the ring, a beautiful pattern of runes was shimmering with familiar light. They were just like those runes that every Awakened had seen countless times when communicating with the Spell.

But that wasn't the first reason why Sunny had noticed it. The most unusual thing about the dais was that unlike everything else inside of the Spire, it was utterly devoid of growths of crimson coral. The stone surface surrounding the ring was strangely clean and untouched by it.

Looking at the shimmering runes and the iron rings through his shadow, Sunny felt something move in his heart.

He was sure that this was the Gateway.

They were so close...

As he watched it, the whole Spire suddenly shuddered. Massive pieces of coral broke off and fell down, crashing into other branches down below. Suddenly, the darkness that surrounded the Dreamer Army became less impenetrable.

High above them, the radiant halo of light became several times more bright.

...Nephis had reached the Crimson Terror.

With a somber grimace, Sunny escaped from his reverie and dashed forward, slicing several golems as he went. The frightened Sleepers followed, entrusting their fates into his hands.

As more and more tremors ran through the ancient tower and several enormous pillars of coral completely collapsed, they ascended even higher and approached the vast balcony.

And then, finally, Sunny jumped down and landed on solid stone.

Shattering a few golems, he cleared enough space for others to follow and watched several more people reach the balcony. One after another, the Sleepers jumped off the treacherous coral and joined him. Those who were the first to catch up repelled the attacking golems to let the others come down.

Soon, all hundred of them were on the balcony — and just in time. A few seconds later, a tremendous piece of debris fell from above, pulverizing the branch of coral they had used to get there.

Sunny lingered for a few moments, watching as crimson pieces rained down, and then turned away with a determined expression.

"Come on! We're almost there!"

The remains of the Dreamer Amry cut through the mass of golems and escaped it. Running with all the speed they could manage, the crowd of young men and women approached the Gateway and froze, stunned by the sight of it.

Hypnotized by it.

In front of them... was the hope that they had forgotten for so long.

The torturous promise of freedom that had taunted them every day, hidden away in the terrifying, looming silhouette of the Crimson Spire.

Their way home.

Salvation.

Most of them had spent so long on the Forgotten Shore that the thought of ever being able to escape it became nothing more than a distant dream.

Even when they had followed Changing Star and chose to believe her promises, salvation was just a concept. An idea.

Now that they saw it as a real thing, many did not know how to react.

...Well, Sunny was there to make the process easier.

"What are you staring at, idiots?! Pick up your jaws and move! Battle formation! Protect the rear! Wounded and non-combatants go first, everyone else holds off the damn golems and then follows! One at a time, bastards!"

Coming back to their senses thanks to his angry shout, the Sleepers quickly reorganized themselves. Those who could still fight faced away from the Gateway and formed a defensive line, protecting the wounded with their bodies. Those who couldn't helped the people in the worst condition enter the iron ring.

Sunny watched as the first human was placed in the center of the Gateway. A moment later, the runes surrounding the ring flashed with shimmering light. The body of the Sleeper suddenly shone, too. The ghostly shine was dim at first, but then grew brighter and brighter. Soon, it was hard to distinguish the shape of the human body at the center of that light.

And then, the light dissipated, much like a Memory or an Echo would, leaving nothing behind.

After all these years, all that suffering, all that loss, the first Sleeper had finally escaped the Forgotten Shore.

Looking through the emptiness left by the disappearance, Sunny realized that he had forgotten to breathe.

A second later, an exhilarated cheer rose above the crowd of humans. The intensity of emotion in their voices... no words existed to describe the complicated, overwhelming conflagration of feelings burning in the chests of the survivors of the Dreamer Army at that moment.

Well, at least Sunny had none.

In the next moment, the pursuing wave of golems crashed into the defensive line, and the next human stepped into the Gateway.

The defenders held their ground, throwing the coral creatures back.

Sunny lingered at the edge of the dais, watching the crowd of humans. One after another, they were disappearing into the beautiful radiance of the Gateway, while the others continued to confidently repel the assault of the golems.

They were going to survive.

That meant that his job here was done.

...And, just as he had expected, Caster was nowhere to be seen.

Lingering for a few short moments, Sunny glanced at the Gateway one last time and then stepped away.

As he moved through the crowd of humans and approached its edge, someone suddenly called out his name.

Turning his head, Sunny saw Effie. The huntress was carrying the unconscious body of Kai on one shoulder, and keeping Cassie close to her own under another. The blind girl's face was ashen, confused, and empty.

"Doofus! Where are you going?"

Sunny stared at her for a few moments, and then suddenly smiled.

"...There's just some unfinished business I need to deal with. Take care, you three. I will... see you later. I hope."

With that, he took a step back and disappeared into the shadows.

Chapter 337: Nobody | Shadow Slave

Summoning the Dark Wing and the Prowling Thorn, Sunny jumped off the edge of the stone balcony. In the next second, his dagger pierced the darkness and bit into a fractured coral branch high above. With a sharp pull, Sunny sent himself flying upward, the transparent cloak turning into a blur behind his back.

All around him, the interior of the Crimson Spire that remained unchanged for thousands of years was shifting. The ancient tower continued to shudder and quake as it endured the calamitous consequences of the battle between Changing Star and the vessel of the artificial sun.

Vast coral roots were shattering and plunging down, drowning the echoing expanse of the Spire with deafening clangor. As massive slabs of coral collided against lower branches, they were pulverized in turn.

Moving through all this destruction, Sunny struggled to stay alive.

Before he could even reach the root he had been aiming for, it was obliterated by falling debris. The mass of coral then rained down, threatening to bury Sunny under its deadly weight. Not phased, he twisted and hurled the Prowling Thorn sideways, then flew out of the way of the collapsing coral. Just a second later, Sunny hit the side of an intact root and pushed himself off its surface, continuing to ascend.

He spun and twisted, using the Prowling Thorn and every surface he could reach to dodge the falling slabs of coral, avoid being cut to pieces by deadly clouds of flying splinters, and soar higher and higher.

As he did, the shadow jumped from one root to another, searching for Caster.

The Legacy was much faster than Sunny, but was chained to the ground and didn't have the advantage of being able to see in the dark. Sunny was certain that he would be able to catch up to him before too long.

And after a few torturous minutes, he inevitably did.

Emerging from a cloud of coral dust, Sunny left a crimson trail in the air as he landed on a wide root in a nimble roll. A moment later, he jumped to his feet and stood silently in the darkness, waiting for Caster to appear.

Up here, at the highest levels of the Spire, the chaos was not as pronounced. Those branches of coral that were going to break had already fallen, and the few remaining ones were relatively stable. That allowed Sunny to predict which route the Legacy was going to take.

The cool polished wood of the Weaver's Mask rested comfortably on his face, hiding his features.

Sunny wasn't sure what resources and connections the Han Li clan possessed, so he chose to be extra careful. He was wary of someone tracing Caster's death back to him with the help of a prophetic Aspect Ability or some strange and powerful Memory... a vengeful Legacy clan was the last thing he would want to deal with after returning to the real world.

And by now, he was sure that one of the two of them was going to die here, in this cursed and dreadful tower.

This confrontation was long overdue.

He was also wary of Caster himself. The proud scion was many things, but a fool was not one of them. There was a chance that he had long guessed Sunny's Flaw.

The mask was his insurance against that eventuality.

'Let's see which one of us is better... let's see which one of us deserves it more...'

For Sunny, this fight was not only about defeating Caster. It wasn't even about defending Neph.

It was about defeating the world itself.

A lifetime ago, when he and Caster had first met in the Academy, they were on the opposite sides of humanity.

One was on the top, and the other was on the bottom.

One was strong and surrounded by a circle of admirers, and the other one was weak and alone. One had the best education, the best mentors, the vast resources of his powerful family, the inherited arsenal of Memories, and plenty of soul shards to propel him forward to future success.

The other had nothing.

Sunny had always had nothing. No family and no home, no place to call his own, no one to care about whether he lived or died, no opportunity, no chance... no future.

Thrust into the same hell as Caster, he clawed and fought, suffered and endured, survived and bettered himself through will, intellect, and countless brushes with death. And now, a year later, he was ready to claim his rightful place.

By defeating Caster, he was going to prove once and for all that he wasn't lesser than anyone. That he wasn't some inconsequential nobody to be discarded and forgotten, to be lost on the pages of history. That he mattered as much as those "real" humans did.

That he was as exceptional as the best of them, despite the fact that he wasn't born into wealth and prosperity.

...Much more so, even.

As Sunny waited in the darkness, a light of a Memory lantern swiftly approached from below.

Caster was rushing to the pinnacle of the Spire, using his incredible speed and training to avoid being killed by the falling debris. He was already

getting close when, suddenly, the light of his lantern fell on a motionless figure that stood in the center of a wide coral root, barring his way.

Dark armor weaved out of soft fabric, with lusterless black leather protecting vital spots. An austere blade held lightly, its tip turned to the ground. The wooden mask that resembled the face of a fearsome demon was new, but still, he had no problem recognizing who was in front of him.

Slowing down and stopping a few meters away from the hateful little vagrant, Caster gritted his teeth and spat:

"It's you."

Hidden behind the mask, Sunny smiled.

"No, no. You are mistaken. Actually, it's not me."

Then, tilting his head, he stared at the proud Legacy and said, his voice full of surprise:

"Oh! Hey, Caster. What a coincidence, to run into you here of all places. So unexpected! Ah, it must be fate..."

Chapter 338: Rest of the Mongrels

Caster remained silent for a while, then calmly looked up, at the furiously pulsating radiance of the Crimson Terror's light. Finally, he lowered his head and exhaled through gritted teeth.

"Out of my way, Sunny."

Sunny blinked a couple of times, then said in a humorless tone:

"Or what?"

The Legacy grimaced and stared at him darkly, his face full of resentment.

"I am so tired of you and your insolence. Why must you always ruin everything? Why can't you just know your place?"

Summoning his beautiful jian, Caster shook his head and said:

"Stay out of this if you value your life. This is the last chance I am going to give you."

Sunny did not move, watching the young man silently. There was nothing but darkness in the eyes of the disturbing black mask. A few moments later, his voice resounded from behind it, strangely hollow:

"...Know my place? What is my place, in your eyes? Huh, Caster?"

The Legacy smiled slightly and then said naturally, as though stating a fact:

"Out of the sight of those better than you, with the rest of the mongrels. What else?"

Sunny shifted slightly. When he spoke, his tone was unexpectedly carefree and friendly:

"Ah, not exactly what I expected to hear. Well, never mind. Before we do this, though, can I ask you one question?"

Caster snarled.

"Sure. Go ahead."

This was something that had been pressing on Sunny's mind for a long time.

"Why do you even want to kill Nephis? What is so important that you are even willing to risk your life?"

The Legacy looked at him with no humor in his eyes. After a few moments, he said in a strange tone:

"This is not something that you, scum, will ever understand. Survival is all you creatures care about. Duty. Loyalty. Honor. Those are the words the likes of you know nothing about. So I will put it in a way that will be easy even for you to comprehend."

He pierced him with an intense gaze and said, each word falling like an avalanche:

"The Immortal Flame must be destroyed."

And then, his voice ringing with profound inevitability, Caster added:

"...This is the will of the Sovereigns."

Sunny stared at him for a bit, engrossed in the solemn atmosphere of this proclamation.

A few seconds later, in a sincerely confused tone, he asked:

"Uh... who?"

Caster's eyes widened. He looked at Sunny with a dumbfounded expression, then shook his head in disbelief.

"Wait... you... you really don't know? She didn't tell you anything?"

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"...Of course she did? Actually, I know exactly what you're talking about. I've been told everything. No one knows more than me on this topic, really."

The Legacy stared at him for a few moments, then suddenly threw his head back and laughed out loud.

"Pathetic mongrel... you don't even know who you serve! You don't even know who rules the world you live in. Why am I even wasting my breath talking to a worm like you?"

Sunny tilted his head, then said in a reproachful tone:

"Ouch. That stings."

Caster smiled darkly, then raised his sword.

"Enough of this! I'm done trying to reason with you, fool. I have allowed you to skulk in the shadows, playing your vulgar games, for long enough. I only permitted you to live because there was no reason to get rid of you. What, do you think that you... you! Can defeat me? That your little schemes and secrets will give you a chance against a true Legacy? Sorry to disappoint, but I figured them out a long time ago."

Sunny remained silent for a bit and then asked in an indifferent tone:

"Oh yeah? Do tell. What are my secrets, exactly?"

The Legacy grinned:

"You hide your strength and pretend to be weak. You go around telling ridiculous tales, making everyone think that you are a lunatic. At first, I thought that you have lost your mind, too. But once I started paying attention, it was so obvious. The constant misdirections, the obnoxious bragging that no sane person would ever believe, the crazy act... this is your Flaw, isn't it?"

As Sunny tensed, Caster smiled triumphantly and said:

"...You are compelled to lie against your will. Did you really think that no one would see the pattern? You even bribed that idol friend of yours to try and mislead everyone. A pathetic attempt. Were you expecting that anyone would buy it?"

Sunny stared at him for a few moments, and then exploded with laughter.

"Ah, crap. You got me! Yes, you are right. This is my Flaw. What sane person would go around telling such outrageous lies?!"

Then, he pierced Caster with a murderous gaze and said:

"...Sadly, it seems that I am at a disadvantage in that regard. It is such a shame that I have no idea what your Flaw is, huh? That I haven't figured it out a long time ago, too."

Caster looked at him, a corner of his mouth turning downward. In the light of the Memory lantern, he looked handsome and confident.

...Mature.

There was a short beard on his face, and a few grey hairs in his luscious mane.

Hidden behind the mask, Sunny smiled:

"It is so sad that I don't know that your powerful, incredible, amazing Aspect Ability shortens your lifespan every time you use it, and that you reverse its effect on your body with a charm Memory in the shape of a sandglass. Ah, if only I was more observant! Too bad I am not."

The Legacy stared at him with a dark expression, his face slowly turning pale. After a while, he uttered:

"...It doesn't matter. After I fulfill my duty and return to the real world, the Awakening will allow me to take back the years that had been stolen from me. While you, rat, will stay in this cursed place fo..."

Before he was done talking, a heavy triangular blade suddenly flew into his face. As a hint of outrage gleamed in Caster's eyes, he easily swatted the kunai away... and turned into a blur, lunging at Sunny with astonishing speed.

Invisible to a human eye, the string of the Prowling Thorn was wrapped around two coral outcroppings, drawn across the wide root right ahead of him. And the proud Legacy was about to...

A green light flashed through the air, and Sunny felt his wrist jerk back, the tension of the string suddenly gone.

'Cr...'

A fraction of a second later, Caster was upon him.

Chapter 339: Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger

'Fast... too fast...'

Caster was moving with astonishing speed, his figure turning into a blur. His Flaw was a cruel one, but the power of the Aspect Ability he possessed was also incredible.

In fact, Sunny had never met anyone with an Ability as powerful as this, with the exception of himself and Nephis. Even the greatest warriors on the Forgotten Shore would have had no chance against it. Gemma, Effie, Seishan... all of them would have been easily killed by the deadly scion of the Han Li clan.

Perhaps only Harus could have fought him to a draw.

But even then, Sunny wasn't sure. Not only did Caster possess a terrifying Ability, but he was also one of the most skilled swordsmen of their generation. He also had a whole arsenal of Memories hidden away inside his soul. Surely, he had a way to fight while blinded.

...That's why Sunny did not waste any time trying to destroy the Memory lantern illuminating their surroundings. Instead, he just trusted his sword, and met Caster's attack with his own.

Two swords collided in the air, and in the next moment, Caster flew past Sunny and slowed down, eventually coming to a stop. A drop of blood fell off the tip of his jian.

Sunny staggered.

'Curse you...'

The sleeve of the Puppeteer's Shroud was torn, and there was a shallow cut on his shoulder. He had managed to deflect the strike aimed at his heart, but wasn't fast enough to avoid being wounded after all.

On Caster's face, there was a dark expression. Looking at Sunny, who was still alive, he grimaced and spat:

"Not bad. This is going to be entertaining, at least."

Hidden behind the mask, Sunny grinned.

"Oh, yeah. I'm having a lot of fun myself, thanks."

Of course, that was a lie.

Back in the Academy, Caster had been the only person to defeat Nephis. Granted, all of them had been much weaker back then. Neph also had not used her Aspect Ability, while Sunny was using his to augment himself right now.

Because of it, the gap in speed between the two of them was not completely lethal. And yet, he was incomparably slower. In terms of pure physical ability, Sunny had no hope of surviving this duel.

...But he already knew the secret of how one had to fight against Caster. He had learned it from Changing Star herself, during that short and fateful spar.

A year ago, Nephis had been in a similar situation, and yet almost defeated her swift enemy. She had anticipated Caster's moves instead of reacting to them, and due to that, his speed advantage had been made less severe. This was what Sunny had to do now.

Of course, to achieve such a feat, one had to possess an intricate understanding of the underlying laws of combat and a true mastery of both their mind and their body.

Luckily, Sunny was one such man. He had obtained clarity a long time ago, and spent every waking hour sharpening his skill and instincts. His mind had entered into the state of flow, making his perception stark and all-encompassing, his thoughts quicker. His intuition was enhanced by the knowledge of the essence of battle.

...That gave him a chance to win.

A moment later, Caster attacked again, and Sunny jerked the Midnight Shard sideways, blocking the ghostly green jian at the last possible moment.

'Up...'

He had begun to chain the next move even before the two blades collided. A split second later, the Legacy brought down his sword in a downward slash, aiming at Sunny's head. However, it was deflected...

'Thrust at the neck...'

...once again, sliding down the length of the tachi and biting Sunny in the shoulder. This time, the leather pauldron of his armor held, but just barely.

Almost instantly, Caster pulled the jian back and then immediately thrust it forward, aiming to cut the enemy's throat. The Midnight Shard awkwardly pushed the gleaming blade away, but not fast enough — another shallow cut appeared on Sunny's neck, seeping with blood.

'Damn it!'

Infuriated, Sunny tried to counterattack, but was forced to concentrate on nothing but defense. Dozens of strikes rained on him in a span of a couple of seconds, filling the echoing expanse of the Crimson Spire with the clangor of steel. More and more cuts appeared on his body — none of them were too deep or dangerous, but that didn't make them less painful.

No matter how cunning and perfect Sunny's movements were, he couldn't make up for his lack of speed completely. Months of training, hundreds of battles, countless hours spent gaining insight into the inner workings of swordsmanship... Caster had done all of that, too, and then some. And he was so much faster.

But, somehow, Sunny was still alive. Not only was he alive, he wasn't even seriously injured... yet.

At some point, he feinted a block and dodged the blade of Caster's sword instead, then whipped his empty head forward, as though trying to punch

the Legacy in the head.

At the last moment, however, a ghostly stiletto appeared in his hand.

...Only to be thrown aside by a powerful hit of the jian. Sunny barely managed to save his arm from being severed at the wrist.

Sparing him a contemptuous glance, Caster snarled:

"Cretin! Have you forgotten that I was there when Changing Star gave you that Memory?!"

Sunny gritted his teeth and lashed out with the austere tachi, buying himself a moment to regroup.

"I guess it slipped my mind!"

With that, he suddenly hurled the Moonlight Shard at the Legacy, then followed it with a fearsome thrust of his sword. Caster easily dodged the stiletto, deflected the tachi, and kicked him in the stomach, sending Sunny staggering back with a pained moan.

For a fraction of a second, he was wide open.

His enemy did not miss that opportunity, turning into a blur as he lunged forward. The gleaming jian flashed through the air, and at the same time, Sunny suddenly spun and twisted his body.

The two of them almost brushed against each other as Caster flew by.

A moment later, Sunny shuddered and bent over, blood streaming from a deep wound on his side.

The Legacy turned around and smiled cruelly, a hint of satisfaction reflecting in his eyes.

"...Not so boisterous now, are you, worm?"

Sunny groaned and slowly straightened his back, pressing one hand against his bleeding side. His voice sounded strained and solemn:

"Ah, yes. That... that didn't go exactly as planned."

Then, he tilted his head and raised his other hand, staring at the object dangling from a torn chain that was gripped in it.

Suddenly, Caster's hand shot toward his neck.

"You..."

Sunny grinned and dangled the sandglass charm in the air.

"Wait... wow! How did this thing get here?"

Caster's gritted his teeth, and the stolen Memory immediately began to radiate a subtle white glow. He was trying to dismiss the charm and return it to his soul core.

...Before that happened, however, Sunny caught it and clenched his fist, ruthlessly shattering the crystal hourglass into tiny pieces.

Caster's eyes widened.

"Bastard!"

As his shout resounded in the darkness, the shards of the precious Memory flew to the ground, turning into sparks of light and disappearing as they fell.

Chapter 340: Honor | Shadow Slave

For a few seconds, both of them stood without motion. On Caster's face, shock and disbelief were mixed with fury, indignation... and fear.

Slowly, he raised his head and pierced Sunny with a hateful gaze.

"You scum..."

His voice was trembling with suppressed rage.

'Good. Rage is good. Anything that makes him lose control is g...'

In the next moment, Sunny got hit in the chest and flew back with a pained scream. Although he somehow managed to deflect the tip of the enchanted jian, the Legacy still ended up slamming into him like a speeding train. The blade of his sword pierced the Puppeteer's Shroud once again, slicing Sunny's forearm.

'Godammit!'

This was just unfair. The Shroud was a tier-five Memory of the Awakened Rank. Where did the bastard find a weapon that could cut through it so easily?!

...Well, Sunny more or less knew where. Who was to say that the ghostly green jian wasn't of the same tier, if not higher? Legacy clans had a lot of powerful Memories in their treasuries.

Unlike him.

Hitting the ground in a roll, Sunny dashed to the side and used the pommel of the Midnight Shard to slam Caster's hand away. He barely saved himself from being decapitated.

Shaken, Sunny threw a handful of coral dust into the air and retreated. A moment later, his enemy emerged from the dust like a vengeful demon. The

damned jian was once again aimed at his heart.

But...

Caster looked different.

It seemed that Sunny was right on the money with his guess about the proud scion's Flaw and the purpose of the mysterious charm Memory. Before, Caster had already looked slightly older than the other members of the cohort... which was strange, considering that both Effie and Kai were supposed to be the oldest among them. This was what had initially caught Sunny's attention, because back at the Academy, there had been no such difference.

However, now that the crystal sandglass was broken, time seemed to be catching up with the Legacy. If anyone were to see him now, they would have assumed that he was in his late twenties, perhaps even early thirties.

He still resembled the youth that Sunny had met just a year ago, but just barely. Instead, a handsome, mature, powerful man was attacking him, his dark skin still smooth, but already showing the signs of future wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and mouth. There were several silver hairs in his beard.

Straining every muscle in his body, Sunny stood his ground and parried the deadly thrust, then dodged to the left. Once again, he was a fraction of a second late, and another cut appeared on his body.

'Curses!'

With a pained grimace, Sunny dodged, evaded, parried and blocked, continuing to retreat and create distance between himself and Caster. At some point, a furious roar made his ears ring:

"Get back here, you rat! Why are you running like a coward?!"

Hidden behind the mask and struggling to breathe, Sunny gritted his teeth and hissed:

"No... reason... in particular..."

The next time he and Caster clashed, the Legacy appeared to be in his late thirties. Now, he resembled a man in his prime. His powerful physique became even more formidable, his broad shoulders straining the metal of the sturdy scale armor. His temples were grey, and his beard had silver streaks running through it. He looked like the kind of older man young girls would be utterly smitten by.

Sunny groaned as he felt another laceration appear on his body, pushed Caster away, then dashed back. The Midnight Shard flew from one side to another, from low to high, not stopping even for a split second. The ringing of steel fused into a continuous, deafening clamor. He felt as though his lungs were on fire, but couldn't allow himself to slow down ever for a moment.

A momentary lapse was going to cost him his life.

'Come on... this... this is not much worse than facing... against... Saint...'

But it was worse. So much worse...

Even while augmented by the shadow, Sunny couldn't resist Caster's furious onslaught. He was stronger and much more resilient, but that was the thing about sharp weapons — they were created to make the amount of force required to kill someone much less demanding. A skilled swordsman that relied on speed could dispatch of an enemy with one well-aimed touch of the blade.

To someone like Sunny, Caster was a nightmare. If not for the Blood Weave, he would have grown weak and slow from blood loss a long time ago, just from the numerous cuts on his body.

And yet, he resisted and continued to retreat, desperately deflecting one lightning-fast strike after another.

...The next time Sunny got a good look at the proud Legacy, he felt a cold shiver run down his spine.

Attacking him was an old man. His gaunt face was laced with a spiderweb of wrinkles, and his hair and beard were completely grey. There was almost no sign left of the handsome youth he had known... and despised... for so long.

Caster was still full of power and vigor, though. His fury was still as murderous and scathing as it had been before. His speed, however... was just a tiny bit slower.

"Die, mongrel!"

With a furious roar, Caster brought down the ghostly jian down on Sunny, who was still reeling from the previous blow. Desperate, Sunny raised his tachi into an awkward semblance of a block. When their swords collided, the Midnight Shard flew aside and almost slid from his hands.

...What's worse, Sunny lost his balance and fell backward, landing on the ground in a heap.

As a cruel smile appeared on the old man's weathered face, he lunged forward to finish the defenseless enemy.

...But at the last second, a calm voice resounded from behind his back.

The voice he hated, but knew so well.

Standing somewhere behind him, Nephis ordered in a tone that denied refusal:

"Back!"

Caster's eyes widened. With an expression of utter terror, he spun around and raised his sword, ready to finally face the person he had dreaded and wanted to kill for so long.

However, when he did, he saw nothing but emptiness.

There was no one behind him. Just a simple rock laying on the ground.

As Caster watched in confusion, his thoughts slow due to the debilitating effect of age, the rock shouted in Changing Star's voice:

"Hide in the shadows!"

Almost immediately, the proud scion's pupils narrowed. With a dark grimace, he spun back, moving his sword into a defensive position.

...He was just a fraction of a second late.

Without making any sound, the tip of the Midnight Shard pierced his scale armor, his flesh...

And then his heart.

Staring at the stunned face of the feeble old man in front of him, Sunny scowled and sighed.

Caster looked down, at the blade protruding from his chest and the blood streaming from beneath, then weakly grabbed the tachi with his hand. A pained, resentful grimace contorted his pale, wrinkled face.

Straining to raise his head, he looked Sunny in the eyes and whispered:

"You... you have no... no honor."

Sunny stared at the dying old man with pity, then looked away.

"...There is honor, indeed. Honor... is not just a word powerful scumbags invented to make young fools like you die for them. And kill for them. It's not a chain that they wrapped around your neck, to make you a slave."

Caster looked at him for a few moments, trying to say something, but then slowly fell to his knees.

In the sudden silence, the voice of the Spell whispered:

[You have slain a dormant human, Han Li Caster.]

[Your shadow grows stronger!]

Chapter 341: One Thousand | Shadow Slave

Standing above Caster's corpse, Sunny tilted his head slightly.

Despite his expectations, there was not a lot of joy in his heart. Instead, defeating the powerful scion of a true Legacy clan left him feeling somber, and a little bitter.

There was, however, a sense of... if not validation, then at least vindication. It was as though some profound need in his soul was finally satisfied, making it more solid.

Steady.

With a pained groan, Sunny took a step back, turned around, and dismissed the Weaver's Mask.

He was in better shape than he had expected to be. Countless cuts on his body were painful, but not dangerous. Blood Weave was diligently doing its job, preventing him from losing too much of the precious red liquid. The cuts were already starting to scab over and close.

The only serious wound was the gash on his side, but it, too, had already stopped bleeding. Very soon, it was going to start healing, too. Until then, it was not going to hinder his movements a lot, as long as Sunny was ready to endure a bit of suffering.

After a year on the Forgotten Shore, dealing with pain was one of his best trained skills.

'...I've been through worse. Much worse. This is nothing.'

Then, another thought entered his mind.

'That shadow fragment... it should have brought me to a thousand, right?'

A moment later, he realized that his whole being was somehow... weird. It felt as though there was intense heat in his chest, slowly growing more and more scalding. This sensation was not exactly physical, but more of a spiritual one. Like the core of his soul was undergoing a violent change.

With a mix of anticipation and dread, Sunny concentrated on this feeling.

'Here we go...'

What was going to happen to him?

Suddenly, he heard the voice of the Spell again. In the eerie expanse of the Crimson Spare, where ancient darkness fused with otherworldly light, it sounded solemn and almost... triumphant?

[Your shadow is overflowing with power.]

Sunny listened tensely, trying to guess what was it going to say next.

[Your shadow is taking shape.]

In the next moment, he staggered and fell to his knees. His eyes widened and lost focus.

The heat that was building up in Sunny's soul had reached a critical point, and then exploded. It felt as though his core was being torn apart, drowning him with intense, indescribable pain. Disoriented and frightened, he tried to scream, but no sound came out of his mouth.

Something was emerging from within his soul, ripping it into shreds. Sunny knew that he couldn't stop that process, and so, all he could do was endure.

As Sunny convulsed on the ground, the Spell whispered:

[...Your shadow is complete.]

And then, something strange happened.

The Spell was about to say something else, but then the entire Crimson Spire suddenly shuddered. This quake was much stronger than all the previous ones, making it feel as though the gargantuan structure was about to topple. Sunny heard the deafening sound of breaking stone.

Almost at the same time, he was suddenly enveloped in absolute darkness, all light disappearing from the echoing interior of the ancient tower.

...And the Spell abruptly fell quiet, its last proclamation left unsaid.

The pain tearing his soul apart was also gone. It didn't feel as though the process was finished, though. It felt as though it was interrupted.

'Wha... what is happening?'

Confused and disoriented, Sunny looked around.

Why was it so dark?

Following a premonition, he then raised his head and glanced up.

'...What?'

The furious light of the Crimson Terror was gone.

As Sunny tried to wrap his head around this fact, two things registered in his mind.

The first one was that he felt very strange. His chest was still full of ethereal heat, but there was also something else. Some kind of... interference? He was having trouble finding words to describe that sensation, but knew that it wasn't harmful. At least not immediately.

The second one was that...

'Crap!'

The second thing he noticed was that, currently, there were giant slabs of stone plunging down on his head. Follow current novels on

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Picking himself up from the ground, Sunny dashed to the edge of the wide root and jumped off of it. Just a second later, one of the slabs crushed into the coral, turning it into dust. A violent shockwave hit him in the back.

The Prowling Thorn was currently restoring itself in the Soul Sea, its invisible string cut by Caster's enchanted jian, so, for a moment, Sunny found himself in free fall. Then, the transparent blur of the Dark Wing finally weaved itself from sparks of light on his back and allowed him to glide forward, following the momentum of the jump.

As he reached the wall of the Spire, another deafening crash resounded from behind. Looking up and at the descending mass of broken stone, Sunny thrust the Moonlight Shard forward. The tip of the Fallen Memory easily sunk into the ancient granite, giving him purchase.

Hanging on it, he pressed himself against the cold stones and gritted his teeth, waiting for the avalanche of debris to pass and praying that nothing hits him. A few moments later, the Spire shuddered again, and then grew still.

Somewhere down below, destruction was still raining on the interior of the Spire, but this high, it was relatively quiet.

Sunny opened his eyes.

He was still alive.

The dome of the Crimson Spire seemed to be broken, letting in beautiful sunshine. The darkness was not as impenetrable now, suffused with that light. Dust particles floated in the air, sparkling like tiny diamonds.

'Sunlight... sunlight?!'

Panicking, Sunny looked around, searching for shelter... but then noticed that his shadow was utterly calm. Unlike before, when his soul was being destroyed by the artificial sun, it wasn't doing anything.

...It did seem a bit confused, though.

'What the hell is going on?!'

Perplexed, Sunny decided to make absolutely sure that the annihilating power of the Terror was gone from the rays of sunshine and dove into the Soul Sea.

What he saw there shocked him so much that he almost let go of the hilt of the Moonlight Shard and fell down.

The entire landscape of the tranquil sea was changed. If before there was nothing but darkness, now, it was filled with blinding white light. The light flowed through Sunny's soul, making the silent waters ripple and swirl.

Up above, the black sphere of the Shadow Core was burning with furious flames. It trembled and seethed, as though overflowing with power. However, that power was being suppressed by the current of light, which prevented it from spreading outward.

Beneath it, there was a massive whirlpool.

Stunned, Sunny stared at the unrecognizable expanse of his soul and didn't know how to react.

'What the hell is this?!'

Full of unease and dark thoughts, he hesitated for a bit and then summoned the runes.

Everything was the same as the last time he had glanced at them, except for one line:

Shadow Fragments: [1000/1000.]

...Not, not everything.

In the cluster of runes describing his Attributes, a few new ones appeared.

Concentrating on them, Sunny held his breath and read:

Attribute: [Soul Conduit.]

Chapter 342: Crimson Terror | Shadow Slave

[Soul Conduit].

The Attribute had no description, nor was its acquisition announced by the Spell. Staring at the runes for a few more seconds, Sunny cast one last glance at the white void of his Soul Sea and left it.

He had no answers for this mysterious sequence of events, but his intuition was ringing the alarm bell.

He was almost sure that the strange and painful process that began after he had absorbed the last shadow fragment was somehow interrupted. The white light permeating the Soul Sea felt unnatural and wrong, like something external to it rather than natural. The mysterious new Attribute was most likely connected to this external influence instead of to the saturation of the Shadow Core.

In fact, [Soul Conduit] was most likely the manifestation of the radiant force that was currently suppressing the core. In that sense, this Attribute was more akin to the mind hex of the Soul Devourer than to the Blood Weave. It wasn't something that Sunny had achieved or acquired. It was forced upon him, for reasons yet unknown.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny shifted and changed his grip on the handle of the Moonlight Shard. Then, he summoned the Ordinary Rock and immediately dismissed it. Finally, he ordered the shadow to wrap itself around his body, then shift to the ghostly stiletto and back.

...At least the new Attribute did not seem to be directly harmful. Sunny was still in control of his body and mind, as well as having full access to his Memories and Shadow Control. All it seemed to be affecting was the Shadow Core itself, preventing it from... from achieving whatever it was that had failed to happen.

At least for now. But how long would that safety last?

Raising his head, Sunny stared at the pinnacle of the Crimson Spire. Something unexplainable had transpired there, causing this strange turn of events.

Why was he trying to guess if all the answers were most likely waiting for him up above?

To his side, a massive slab of stone had lodged itself between stumps of broken coral roots. More debris piled on top of it at steep angles, forming a twisting path to the distant sunlight.

Pushing himself off the wall of the tower, Sunny glided forward and landed on the inclined stone surface. Then, he lingered for a few moments and began climbing up.

The higher he ascended, the more sunshine surrounded him. Eventually, the whole tower was filled with nothing but stark beams of light and deep, dark shadows. The world was black and white, as though no other color was allowed into this solemn space.

After a while, Sunny approached the broken dome of the Crimson Spire.

There, a vast hall was hidden in the darkness, both its floor and roof now shattered, letting in the brightness of the sun.

With a deep sigh, Sunny reached with his hands and pulled himself into the hall. He was now at the very pinnacle of the Crimson Spire.

In the lair of the Terror of the Forgotten Shore.

At the very tip of the ancient tower, there was once a vast and beautiful chamber. It seemed as though it had a large circular opening in its center, allowing sunlight to easily flow into the gargantuan structure at high noon.

Then, however, that opening had become overgrown by crimson coral. And now it was gone.

Due to something that had happened during Changing Star's battle against the Terror, the floor of the chamber partially collapsed, bringing the coral down with it. The ceiling was damaged too, although to a lesser extent.

Through the chasm in the Spire's roof, Sunny could see the boundless white skies and the burning orb of the artificial sun.

Lingering at it for a moment, he then lowered his gaze and looked at the chamber itself.

The first thing he saw was Nephis, who was sitting on the floor, staring into the distance.

Although her state was not as terrifying as on that terrible night when a dweller of the depths had pulled her beneath the waves of the cursed sea, she did not look too good.

The Starlight Legion Armir was practically destroyed, revealing gruesome burns and cuts on her ivory skin. Just like then, white flames were seeping out of them instead of blood.

These fires seemed strangely weak, though, as though on the verge of being extinguished. They were also failing to mend her mangled flesh. Neph's wounds appeared to be healing, but at a very slow pace — a far cry from the miraculous restoration that Sunny had witnessed so many times in the past.

The furious power that had always burned deep within her soul seemed to be finally exhausted. Almost...

Following her gaze, Sunny shuddered when he saw the Terror.

The creature that had created the Forgotten Shore might have looked as a human once, but now, it was like a feverish nightmare.

For some reason, Sunny had expected to see the familiar shape of the nameless goddess, whose statue was created in the likeness of the girl that had been made into the vessel of the artificial sun.

What met him instead was a giant creature whose body was made out of a perverse fusion of crimson coral and mutilated human flesh. In a sense, it was similar to the crimson golems he had fought at the base of the Spire. It was a twisted approximation of a living being, one that radiated a horrifying sense of madness, wrongness, and loss.

Instead of a human face, the Terror had hundreds of them, all contorted in expressions of blind agony and suffering. Their mouths were open, as though straining to scream. Their eyes were empty wells of pure darkness.

At least now, they were. When the Terror was alive, they must have shone with blinding, annihilating light.

...And it was, unmistakably, dead.

The harrowing creature was sprawled on the floor, its limbs unmoving, its body fractured almost in half. The edges of the terrible wound were burned and melted, leaving no doubt that it was dealt by Changing Star's incandescent silver blade.

'How... how is this possible?'

Stunned, Sunny stared at the vanquished Terror, failing to comprehend what he saw.

How could Neph kill a Fallen Terror? No matter how powerful she was, she was still a Sleeper. Even with the tremendous augmentation of the Dawn Shard, she should not have been capable of slaying something this powerful.

Something was very wrong here.

'This doesn't make sense.'

...But then again, this wouldn't be the first Terror Nephis had slain. Changing Star had killed one in her First Nightmare, too, earning her that name. Still, there was a vast difference between a dormant human killing an Awakened Terror and a Fallen one.

One feat was impossible. The other... the other was simply unthinkable.

Turning to her, Sunny hesitated and then said in disbelief:

"You... you actually killed it."

Neph flinched, as though noticing his presence for the first time. Then, she slowly turned her head and looked at him with empty, lost eyes. Only after a few seconds, a hint of recognition appeared in them.

She remained silent for a while, and then said in a hollow voice:

"...Sunny. You are finally here."

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He hesitated for a few moments, not sure how to answer. As seconds passed by, the silence between them grew tense, full of untold meaning.

Finally, Nephis blinked and looked away, staring at the corpse of the Crimson Terror. Her sword hand trembling slightly.

"...Killed it? Yes... I did. Got lucky, I guess..."

After a while, she added in a quiet voice:

"It was just a fake star, in the end."

Sunny smiled slightly, but his eyes remained cold.

"Lucky... I know a thing or two about being lucky, Neph. A creature like this would not have died just because of bad luck."

She remained silent for a bit, then sighed and looked down.

"It was evolving... trying to become a titan. The burden of transformation made it vulnerable. I just happened to attack while the Terror was at its weakest. That's why it died..."

'Evolving... into a titan?'

Noticing a surprised expression on his face, Changing Star grimaced and pointed to the artificial sun.

"Have you not thought about what we have done?"

Sunny looked up, at the radiant sphere of light, and frowned.

In all the chaos, he had indeed forgotten to consider the full scale of what had transpired after the battle, as well as the reasons for and consequences of it.

Come to think of it... why would the light of the artificial sun destroy the souls of every living creature it touched? It had not been like this before the fall of the ancient civilization, for many generations, at least.

But then, the Vessel had become corrupted and turned into a Nightmare Creature. The Terror. And at the same time, the seals imprisoning the curse of the all-consuming darkness had been destroyed, letting it free.

...So, in fact, the corrupted sun had never existed without the dark sea keeping it company.

Until today.

Sunny had always thought that the sun was restraining the dark sea. Could it be... that it had always been restrained by the darkness, as well?

And when he banished the ancient curse and locked it underground... the sun was finally liberated from its shackles. That's why its light suddenly changed, turning into the annihilating white radiance.

It had become free to do whatever it wanted.

But there was something else...

As his eyes widened, Nephis nodded.

"Yes. The artificial sun does not just illuminate the vicinity of the Crimson Spire. It illuminates the whole of the Forgotten Shore. Its light reaches everywhere. So... as we were fighting our way through the tower... most of the living creatures on the Forgotten Shore had been wiped out. All that death, all those countless souls... guided into the Spire by the Labyrinth, like a colossal hecatomb, to fuel the evolution of the Crimson Terror."

And Nephis just happened to attack while the Terror was in the throes of that terrifying transformation. Well... that wasn't a coincidence, most likely. Sunny had not forgotten the thoughtful look on her face as Neph had peered out of the gates of the Spire before giving the Dreamer Army the command to advance.

He shivered, only now realizing that this whole region of the Dream Realm was now almost completely empty of life. Only a few Nightmare Creatures must have survived... those who were lucky enough to hide from the deadly sunlight in time, or were powerful enough to resist it.

Such a boundless influx of souls would indeed be enough to push the Crimson Terror to the next step of its evolution... devolution? Whatever it was that happened to Nightmare Creatures as they grew more powerful. Not that Sunny knew anything about this matters — but if anything could cause something like that, then the evisceration of an entire region of the Dream Realm would certainly do the trick.

Now, however, the Terror was dead, and its corrupting influence was gone, turning the artificial sun back to its normal self.

It couldn't be that easy, though...

As if answering his thoughts, the Spire shuddered again. Another slab of stone broke off from the floor of the chamber and plunged down. Suddenly, the light of the sun grew a little bit dimmer.

Looking up, Sunny noticed that the artificial sun looked not as bright as it had just a few minutes ago. It was as though it was slowly dying.

...Was it dying? There was no vessel to channel soul essence into its furnace anymore, after all.

Interrupting his thoughts, Nephis suddenly spoke, her voice hoarse and tired:

"What happened to the others?"

Sunny shifted and looked down through the chasm in the chamber's floor.

Far below, he could see the vast balcony and the shimmering ring of the Gateway on it. Somehow, its shine seemed... weaker. The balcony, however, was empty. There were no humans there, and even the coral

golems lay unmoving, their semblance of life snuffed out when the Terror died.

"Everyone has escaped."

Neph sighed slowly, as if with relief. After a long pause, she moved slightly and asked:

"What about Caster?"

Sunny glanced at her and shrugged. When he spoke, his voice was cold and indifferent:

"...I killed him."

Changing Star remained silent for a long time. Then, she whispered, seemingly addressing no one:

"So that's why..."

Suddenly, a bitter laugh escaped from her lips.

Nephis raised her hands and pressed them against her face, as if overwhelmed by some deep, dark emotion. After a few seconds, her muffled voice reached his ears:

"You shouldn't have killed him, Sunny..."

Sunny snarled.

"Yeah? Why, exactly?"

She remained motionless for a few seconds, and then slowly lowered her hands and put them on her knees. Her face was pale and bleak.

"Have you checked your Attributes?"

He nodded and looked at her with a curious expression.

"I did. There's a new one there. Soul Conduit."

Changing Star stared into the distance and nodded.

"Yeah. Same for me."

Sunny raised his eyebrow and asked, his voice calm and steady:

"Any idea what it means?"

She did not say anything for a while, and then turned her head to look at him.

"Have you not figured it out?"

He shrugged.

"I was a bit preoccupied. Why? What is it?"

Nephis sighed and looked at the walls of the chamber. Finally, she said:
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"This whole tower is a giant soul machine. It was created to collect soul essence and funnel it into the artificial sun. However... it can't function without one small, but crucial gear. A human to serve as the fulcrum of all that power, the conduit for all those souls."

And then, in a much quieter voice, she added:

"...The vessel."

Sunny shuddered, then stared at the corpse of the repulsive creature. The previous vessel of the artificial sun.

Nephis had killed it, destroying a crucial part of the Spire's mechanism... and so, the Spire found it a replacement.

The two of them.

The only two humans left on the Forgotten Shore, conveniently hiding from the obliterating sun inside the ancient tower.

One would be tempted to say that it was fate...

"What does it mean for us, exactly? Are we going to turn into something... like that thing?"

Neph slowly shook her head.

"...Not yet. Not for a long time. The Terror had absorbed most of the souls it had reaped after the battle, and there's no one to make sacrifices to the sun now. The Labyrinth, too, is now dead."

Echoing her words, the Spire trembled once again, and somewhere down below, a deafening sound of crushing stone could be heard.

Sunny tilted his head.

"So what's the problem? Can't we just... get the hell out of here and never come back?"

Changing Star looked at him, her eyes full of cold, bitter emotion.

"You don't get it, do you?"

After that, she gritted her teeth and said:

"The Crimson Spire is a machine, and the Gateway is a part of that machine. The Spire can't function without a human serving as the Soul Conduit... and neither can the Gateway. There has to be a Vessel inside the tower for the Gateway to work."

She slowly rose to her feet, swayed slightly, and finally pierced him with a dark gaze.

"Which means that only one of us can escape."

Sunny stared at her for a few seconds, then looked down at the distant ring of the Gateway.

Finally, he turned back to Nephis and said:

"I don't suppose you'll stay behind and let me go?"

Changing Star looked at him, her striking grey eyes full of intensity and nascent white flames:

"...I was about to ask you the same."

Sunny lingered for a moment, then grinned.

"Not a chance."

Chapter 344: sorrow,Pain, and Rage

Slowly walking away from the edge of the chasm, Sunny stopped opposite Nephis and looked at her.

In his dark eyes, there was nothing but coldness.

"Well... it's not like we didn't know for a long time that this would be how things end. Did we?"

She stared at him for a while, then smiled bitterly.

"...We did."

Indeed, they knew.

From that terrible day when Sunny had first understood the meaning behind Cassie's vision, he suspected that one day, in order to survive, he would have to kill Nephis.

This was the truth he had chosen to hide from, even if it meant losing his mind. The final and most unbearable reason for why he had spent months alone in the Dark City, hunting monsters and slowly turning into one of them.

How does one come to terms with the knowledge that, one day, they will have to kill the person they care for the most?

...Knowledge, indeed, was the heaviest thing in the world.

Back at the beginning of it all, far away from the Dark City, before they had even known that the Crimson Spire existed, Cassie had shared with them a terrible vision.

She said:

"At first, I saw a... a boundless darkness locked behind seven seals. Something vast was churning in the darkness. I felt like if I directly saw it, I would lose my mind. As I watched, terrified, the seals broke one after another, until only one remained. And then that seal broke, too."

The first part of her vision described the day when the Vessel of the Artificial Sun had gone mad, and the curse of the all-consuming darkness had escaped the prison created for it by the seven ancient heroes.

"I saw the human castle again. Only this time, it was at night. There was a lonely star burning in the black skies, and under its light, the castle was suddenly consumed by fire, with rivers of blood flowing down its halls. I saw a corpse in a golden armor sitting on a throne; a woman with a bronze spear drowning in a tide of monsters; an archer trying to pierce the falling sky with his arrows."

The lonely star shining in the black skies was Nephis, the herald of ruinous change, who had drowned the halls of the Bright Castle in blood to become its ruler, and then watched as it burned to the ground.

The corpse in the golden armor was Gunlaug, who had died on his white throne, killed by her hand.

The woman with a bronze spear and the desperate archer were Effie and Kai, who had almost perished fighting against the nightmare horde during the siege of the Crimson Spire.

"In the end, I saw a colossal, terrifying crimson spire. At its base, seven severed heads were guarding seven locks. And at the top, a... a dying angel was being consumed by hungry shadows. When I saw the angel bleed, I suddenly felt as though... as though something so precious that it can't be described with words was taken from me."

Seven severed heads guarding seven locks were the heads of the giant statues, who stared at the Star Sigil that Sunny had used to banish the dark sea.

And the last part of the prophecy... it wasn't that hard to understand, too.

Nephis was the dying angel, the precious thing that was going to be taken from Cassie, and Sunny was the hungry shadow that consumed her.

It was their fate.

"Then, I felt so much sorrow, pain and rage that what little remained of my sanity seemed to disappear. That was when I woke up... I think."

This was the last thing Cassie had said.

...Looking at Nephis, Sunny sighed and turned away.

"I warned you, didn't I? I told you that this story won't have a happy ending. That there will be only sorrow, pain, and rage. Do you remember what you answered me?"

These were the words he said on the day Neph had asked him to join her expedition.

Back then, his suspicion that they would inevitably end up as enemies had already grown, becoming almost a certainty.

Almost... that cursed word. This was the word that had given him hope, no matter how small. Hope that he was wrong.

But despite that hope, Sunny had been preparing for this moment for a long, long time.

It was because he had known that he would have to face Nephis in combat that he had decided to incorporate Saint's methodical style into his technique, why he trained without rest, day and night, not sparing himself from the pain and hardship. If his only skill was one that she herself had taught him, what chance did he have of defeating her?

It was for that reason that he had climbed to the highest point of the Hunter's statue and spent a night alone there, steeling himself for the inevitable future. Forcing himself to accept the terrible truth that, soon, he would have to kill Nephis.

It was because of this that he had refused Changing Star's offer to heal him. How could he allow her to endure the terrible pain of the white flames, knowing that she would be suffering for the sake of her future killer?

And it was because of this that he had not tried to learn all of her secret plans, remaining comfortable in his role as a hired mercenary. An outsider. He had known that, no matter what, they would end up here, in this moment, forced to fight each other.

Fate... fate was a terrifying enemy to fight against. He knew it better than most.

Fate always won, in the end.

Defeating it was almost impossible.

...Shifting slightly, Nephis looked at him and answered, her voice strangely wistful:

"...Life is not a story. It only ends when you die."

Sunny smiled.

"So... are you ready to die?"

As white sparks ignited in the depths of Changing Star's eyes, she answered with another question:

"What about you?"

Instead of answering, Sunny summoned the Midnight Shard and raised it, assuming a battle stance.

Opposite of him, Nephis did the same, her silver sword weaving itself from blinding light.

...Of course, neither of them planned to kill the other. They needed the other to remain alive, at least until the victor passed through the Gateway.

How long would the loser survive after that, though? Especially if they were beaten terribly enough to lose the ability to resist further.

Staying behind meant death.

...As the ancient, gargantuan tower quaked around them, balancing on the edge of collapse, Lost from Light and Changing Star prepared to cross their blades.

Chapter 345: Shadows and Light

Sunny and Nephis looked at each other, the air practically crackling with tension at the point where their gazes met.

The white flame seeping from Changing Star's wounds suddenly flashed in a furious outburst, closing some of her wounds and making others seem less severe. After that, however, it grew weak and disappeared, retreating back into the furnace of her soul. As a pained grimace contorted the young woman's face, a dim radiance then slowly shined from beneath her ivory skin.

At the same time, the shadow flowed up and wrapped itself around Sunny's body, making it brim with power and vitality. He inhaled deeply and slightly moved, shifting his weight from one leg to another.

'How... how can it end...'

Before the thought could fully form, Sunny ruthlessly destroyed it and banished it from his mind.

This was the last obstacle on his way back to the real world... and the most deadly. Sunny had fought many terrible creatures in the cursed hell of the Forgotten Shore, but none of them were as fearsome and dangerous as Changing Star. This was going to be his hardest battle yet.

To win it, he had to be absolutely clear, absolutely focused. He couldn't allow himself to feel anything, be distracted by anything.

No doubt, no fear. No regret, no compassion.

Only determination. Only resolve.

Only murderous will to prevail.

As dust particles shined in the beams of white light that fell through the broken roof of the ancient chamber... as stark shadows swelled with dark

anticipation... Nephis brought the pommel of her sword to her shoulder.

White flames ignited in her eyes.

And then, suddenly, she lunged forward.

'Fast!'

But not fast enough to not give Sunny enough time to react. Raising the Midnight Shard, he dashed forward to block her furious assault... and shuddered, the force of the impact sending a shock through his entire body.

It felt as though his sword had collided with a mountain.

Their blades got entangled for a moment, and then separated. Almost immediately, the silver longsword lashed out again, appearing from an unexpected direction.... and then again, and again, and again.

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Sunny feverishly defended, chaining blocks and deflections into one uninterrupted sequence of swift moves. Despite his best efforts, he reeled slightly after each strike. It was as though he was being hit by a hurricane of adamantite sledgehammers, each hit making his bones tremble and groan.

'How... how is she that strong...'

How was Nephis so strong? How was she so fast? How was she so resilient?

It didn't make sense.

By now, Sunny had fully saturated his core, bringing him to the pinnacle of what a human of his Rank could achieve in terms of physical ability. His power was further doubled by the augmentation of the shadow, making him more akin to one of the Awakened than to a mere Sleeper. No dormant human should have been able to match his power in every regard.

And yet, Changing star did. More than that, she was more powerful than him, tremendously so. She was more like a Nightmare Creature than a human; her movements were fast as lightning, her strength was terrifying, and her technique was flawless, leaving him no chance to exploit even the smallest of mistakes.

...No Sleeper should have been that powerful. It was simply impossible.

And yet, somehow, it wasn't.

'Impossible, impossible...'

Deflecting another blow, Sunny gritted his teeth and dashed to the side, hoping to exploit the momentary opening in his enemy's defense. However, he was met by the ruthless flash of the silver blade instead. The opening was just a ruse, one which almost cost him his hand.

'Something is very wrong here...'

Either the augmentation of the white flame was much more powerful than that of his shadow, or something else was at play. However, Sunny didn't think that the radiance emanating from Neph's skin was stronger than his own physical enhancement. From what he had observed during her battle against Gunlaug, it was roughly the same or only slightly more forceful — it shouldn't have given her this big of an advantage, especially in its seemingly exhausted state.

Somehow, Nephis had grown much stronger between then and now.

But how?

...At least the silver sword was not burning with the annihilating, incandescent light. If it was, the Midnight Shard might have already been if not destroyed, then at least severely damaged. In that regard, luck was still on Sunny's side.

They exchanged several more blows and disengaged for a fraction of a second, then closed in again. Changing Star's sword shot forward, missing

Sunny's face by a few millimeters... or so he thought before sensing warm drops rolling down his cheek. A thin cut appeared on it, swelling with blood.

Just a little bit to the right, and he would have lost an eye.

Shaken, Sunny deflected the sword away, preventing Nephis from slicing his neck with a reverse cut, and leaned forward in an attempt to ram her with his shoulder.

Changing Star easily sidestepped around Sunny and brought her weapon down, forcing him to block from a disadvantageous position and stagger back.

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'Curse it!'

Their violent clash must have looked furious and morbidly beautiful. Both moved with incredible speed and possessed ferocious strength, both were skilled and experienced, forged into formidable killers by hundreds of deadly battles.

One was darkness and shadows, while the other was radiance and light.

But the true combat was happening somewhere else, invisible to the naked eye. This fight was as much about strategy and insight as it was about physical prowess and technique.

After all, to excel as a fighter, one had to master both their body and mind.

Nephis might have been unnaturally fast and strong, but what really made her devastatingly deadly was her own battle genius, her incredible level of understanding of the laws and principles of combat.

Armed with it, she was able to predict what her enemy was going to do even before they themselves knew it. But that was not all. The scariest thing about Nephis was that, through that understanding, she was even able to

manipulate and dictate her opponent's actions, turning them into her puppet. She was in absolute control of the flow of combat.

Combat was her domain, just like shadows were his.

But Sunny was not a novice, either. He was a master of manipulation, too.

But more importantly, he had enough insight and knew Nephis well enough to if not deceive her, then at least not allow her to lure him into an inescapable trap.

That was why, for a dozen torturously long seconds, neither of them had been able to seriously wound the other. Even if Sunny was locked into desperate defense and outmatched in every regard, he still managed to hold Changing Star's monstrous onslaught off.

...At least for now.

Finally, the two of them disengaged and stepped back, pausing for a few moments.

Sunny was breathing heavily, his bloodied face turning even more pale than usual. Nephis stared at him with a grim expression, her own breathing laborious and pained.

If this was a cliché drama, at that point, they would have exchanged words, expressing their resolve and determination. Admiring their enemy or humiliating them with disparaging insults, showcasing their fearlessness by making a carefree joke.

...But it was not. Everything that could have been said had been said already. There was no way back.

All that remained was violence.

Looking at Nephis, Sunny suppressed a devious smile.

Something had changed about the proud daughter of the Immortal Flame clan. Something that he had been waiting for from the start of their vicious

battle.

The wounds that had been partially closed by the white flame were beginning to seep blood again.

And as they did, the Blood Blossom charm hanging on a thread tied around his neck finally rose from its slumber, filling the Midnight Shard with boundless hunger.

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Chapter 346: Promise of Blood

Enhanced by the Blood Blossom, the austere tachi suddenly felt lighter in his hands, full of cold, frightening determination. It was almost as though it had a mind of its own now, a mind focused on one goal: to find the enemy and get a taste of their blood.

'Finally...'

A moment later, Nephis attacked again, her beautiful face cold and indifferent like an alabaster mask. Only the flames in her eyes moved, burning furiously, white as the empty void of the godless heavens above their heads.

Sunny gritted his teeth and moved to meet her. Their blades clashed once again. Just like before, he was shaken by the force of the impact... only now, he had managed to intercept her strike a fraction of a second faster.

It was as though the Midnight Shard was ever so slightly pulling his hand, making it move with a bit more speed, aim a little better, withstand the pressure of the strikes with a subtly less strain.

In the next few seconds, that change had become more apparent.

Before, he had no chance to launch an offense. Changing Star was reveling in her flowing and unpredictable battle style, her every movement oppressive and unpredictable. This unpredictability alone made him wary of committing to an attack.

Of course, Sunny was using the same style. But even though he had mastered it to an admirable degree, his technique was by no means equal to that of Changing Star.

What was worse, she knew it far better than him, so his moves could potentially be predicted with terrifying ease.

The only reason why Sunny was still on his feet was because of the elements of the Saint's grounded style that he had incorporated into his own. Measured and precise, but also capable of explosive counterattacks, it allowed him to both defend against Neph's ruthless assault and restrain her to a certain degree, using the threat of a sudden reversal to keep her from going all out.

More importantly, she was less familiar with that style, which allowed him to diminish the predictability of his movements.

And now, with the help of the Blood Blossom, Sunny was able to resist Neph's more efficiently, even if it was just by a tiny amount.

But the measure of that difference didn't really matter. Because the longer their fight went on and the more she bled, the stronger he would become.

...It wasn't long before he finally managed to land a hit, the tip of his sword scratching against one of her gauntlets.

'This is just a begin...'

However, his thought was instantly interrupted.

'What...'

Neph's suddenly changed her behavior. Perhaps she had sensed the shift in the dynamic between the two of them, or perhaps she was just desperate to end this fight before her powers ran dry and her terrible wounds finally caught up with her.

Or maybe there was some other reason, one that Sunny failed to account for.

But regardless of it, Neph suddenly abandoned her previous calculated attack pattern and instead descended on him in a rain of deadly steel, her defense crumbling and leaving her open to retaliation.

Caught by surprise, Sunny barely had time to shift his stance and block.

The Midnight Shard was thrown down by a violent blow, pressing against his shoulder. The silver longsword slid across its length and scratched against the guard of the tachi, mere centimeters away from Sunny's throat.

For a few heartbeats, the two of them struggled desperately, trying to overpower the enemy. Their bodies were so close that Sunny could feel Neph's breath on his cheek, as well as the heat radiating from her skin.

'Damn it!'

She was just stronger... so much stronger...

Little by little, her sword angled forward, and then bit into his skin, blood flowing on its silver blade. With an angry growl, Sunny let go of the hilt of the Midnight Shard with one hand. His fist shot toward Changing Star's body, the ghostly stiletto appearing in it at the last moment.

But, of course, Nephis had anticipated that. She twisted her torso, allowing the Moonlight Shard to leave a deep but harmless scratch on her breastplate. In doing so, she had to relieve pressure on the tachi, allowing Sunny to push her sword away from his neck.

But before he could jump back, Neph finished her attack by delivering a devastating blow to his head with the pommel of her sword.

Disoriented, Sunny staggered back. He felt blood streaming into his eyes and lost his vision for a moment. Even Shadow Sense was useless, because he simply couldn't differentiate up from down right now.

Suddenly, his heart was full of dread.

'Think, think!'

He had maybe a fraction of a second left before suffering a complete defeat.

'What is she going to do...'

The silver longsword was currently... currently... raised slightly above him after the upward strike. The fastest way to finish the fight would be to bring

it down, possibly with its flat on his head, or with its edge on his shoulder, thus severing one of his arms... yes, the second option was the easiest to execute and the most advantageous...

But it was Nephis he was thinking about. What would she do?

Faced with the choice of protecting his head or his shoulder, Sunny instinctively threw the Midnight Shard up to block a vertical blow aimed at his skull. His body moved on its own, following the memory of countless hours of training. Thanks to that, he was able to perform the block even in this stunned state.

His judgment was correct. The tachi collided against Changing Star's sword and was thrown aside. But thanks to that, the strike missed his head completely.

Instead, it fell on his clavicle and bit deep into his flesh, scraping against bone.

Sunny's world exploded with pain.

...But instead of letting it overpower him, he leaned forward and caught Nephis's hand in a trap, entangling it with his own.

Then, he drove the Midnight Shard forward and felt it pierce soft flesh.

Nephis shrieked, her voice full of agony and shock. Then, she pushed him away.

Sunny fell to the ground.

'Damn... damn, this hurts...'

Regaining some semblance of control over his mind, he raised a hand and wiped the blood away from his eyes. Then, he rose to his knees and looked in the direction where Nephis had been.

She was standing a few meters away, leaning on her sword for support. There was a deep gash in her abdomen, just below the lower edge of the

fractured breastplate of the Starlight Legion Armor, and a grimace of pain on her face.

Blood was flowing from the wound he had caused her like a crimson stream.

Their eyes met for a moment, and then Sunny lowered his gaze, at the austere tachi that lay on the floor between them.

In all the mayhem, he had lost his sword.

Both of them froze for a second.

Then, ignoring the terrible pain pulsating in his wounded shoulder, Sunny lunged forward and grabbed the hilt of the Midnight Shard.

At the same time, Changing Star rushed forward, raising her sword.

...However, neither of them got a chance to deliver a strike.

Because right at that moment, the Crimson Spire shuddered once again, this time much more terribly than before.

And in a deafening thunder of breaking stone, the floor beneath their feet suddenly shattered and collapsed into the darkness, pulling them down with it.

Chapter 347: Free Fall | Shadow Slave

Sunny fell down in a rain of broken stone, the floor beneath his feet suddenly crumbling like shattered glass.

The Crimson Spire shuddered and moaned, like a giant creature convulsing in the throes of death. The light of the artificial sun grew dim and weak, causing another tremor to run through the ancient tower, wide cracks appearing on its granite walls.

Sunny had banished the darkness that devoured the Forgotten Shore every night, and Nephis had killed the vessel of the sun that rose above it every day. Together, they had brought destruction to this cursed land. Today was the end of days for the Forgotten Shore, one that the two of them had ushered in.

And one of them was going to have to endure the fallout of this cataclysmic change.

Surrounded by a rain of falling shards of stone, Changing Star twisted and somehow managed to aim her sword in Sunny's direction. Even more miraculously, he managed to intercept it with his own. Both were thrown away from each other, the transparent wings weaving themselves behind their backs.

For a couple of second, Sunny felt his body plunging down into the darkness. Then, finally, the Dark Wing fully manifested and turned into a blur, supporting his weight.

Dodging a massive slab of granite that threatened to crush him, Sunny used it as a step and propelled himself through the air. The Midnight Shard flashed, aiming at Changing Star's wings, but was blocked by the blade of the silver longsword.

As the debris fell down, two human figures collided against each other and spun in the air. With nothing to serve as a support, the only chance they had

to exert any force was to use the body of the enemy as one. Their bodies entangled, almost as if they were lovers.

But in reality, of course, the purpose of this intimate closeness was not love; it was violence.

Grabbing Nephis with one hand and using his legs to trap hers, Sunny twisted his torso and delivered a devastating blow with his forehead, feeling the brittle bones of her nose shatter under his strike.

...But at the same time, her armored fist crashed into his side, aimed cruelly at the half-closed wound left behind by Caster.

Sunny screamed.

In the next second, her other fist slammed into his face. Augmented by the weight of the silver sword, that blow caused Sunny to lose himself for a short moment.

When he came to his senses, the first thing he saw was a massive slab of granite falling on them from above. Feeling blood stream down his face and from the newly opened wound on his side, Sunny bent his knee, and then used Nephis's body to push himself away.

The two of them flew into opposite directions, narrowly avoiding being crushed by the enormous piece of stone.

Gliding with the help of their enchanted cloaks, Sunny and Nephis circled around each other, moving down in a wide spiral. Both were too preoccupied with dodging the falling pieces of stone to launch another attack, even if they wished too.

Around them, the Crimson Spire was quaking and convulsing, more and more cracks appearing on its walls, whole layers of stone separating from them and plunging down. It felt as though the ancient structure would not be able to hold on for much longer.

Above them, the dying sun was growing weaker with each minute.

...And down below, the runes surrounding the perfect circle of the Gateway were shimmering in the darkness, their light slowly becoming unstable.

Concentrating at the distant balcony, Sunny hesitated for a moment, then threw a glance at Nephis.

Then, he dismissed the Dark Wing and plunged down, abandoning the safety of flight.

Instead, he chose to fall.

With air whistling in his ears, Sunny plummeted through the darkness, approaching the vast balcony with terrible speed.

...Deadly speed.

He had to calculate everything perfectly.

When the Gateway was close enough to discern separate runes shining in a circle around it, he summoned the enchanted cloak again.

As the Memory began to weave itself into existence, Sunny continued to fall, the stone balcony growing closer and closer. A second later, it was already close enough to see the shapes of the dead coral golems in the darkness. A second more, and a bestial fear took hold of his heart... he was about to die, to splatter on the ground like a crushed bug!

Almost at the last moment, the Dark Wing finally came into existence. Immediately, Sunny activated the enchantment and tried to turn his vertical fall into a horizontal glide.

As inertia pulled him down with dreadful speed, he cut a smooth arc in the air and hit the stone surface of the balcony, turning the violent impact into a roll. Then, without losing even a moment, he jumped to his feet and ran toward the Gateway.

Consumed by pain, Sunny limped over the shimmering runes and entered the ring. Almost immediately, a strange feeling overtook him.

It was like... like that strange and indescribable feeling you get a few seconds before realizing that the reality surrounding you is just a dream, and that you are about to wake up.

The light of the runes grew stronger. Simultaneously, Sunny's own body began to glow, emanating the same ethereal light.

...Before that glow had a chance to become bright, though, a shadow fell from above in a deadly rustle of sharp steel.

'No!'

Sunny threw his hands up, deflecting the blow of Changing Star's silver sword. Nephis descended upon him like an avenging angel, the fierce white flames burning in her eyes with frightening intensity.

As soon as her feet touched the stone inside the iron ring, the shimmering runes blinked... and disappeared. Both Conduits were cut off from the Crimson Spire, thus breaking the flow of soul energy. Without it, the Gateway could not function.

Only if one of them was thrown outside would the runes ignite once again.

Sunny gritted his teeth and thrust his sword forward, hoping to get Nephis before she had time to regain her balance. But she was too fast, too cunning; before he could even get close to piercing her flesh, Changing Star was already moving, trapping his blade under her own and throwing it aside.

Sunny rammed into her, throwing all of his weight into one devastating blow. At the same time, he felt cold steel brushing against his ribs, causing more blood to stream down.

The two of them collided with frightening force and fell out of the iron ring of the Gateway, rolling down the steps of the dais. As soon as the first of them crossed the circle of runes, they shimmered and shined once again.

Sunny fell on the cold stones and remained lying there, consumed by pain and exhaustion. A low, tortured moan escaped from his lips.

Something was broken inside of him. He felt weak.

And cold.

He didn't want to stand up.

'I'm not done yet... I'm not...'

Chapter 348: Unbroken | Shadow Slave

Sunny lay on the ground, gulping air like a dying fish. It felt as though he was drowning.

His body was a map of pain. He couldn't even remember how many injuries he had received... there was the gash in his side left by Caster's jian, the gruesome wound that almost severed his clavicle, the long cut across his ribs... and many smaller ones.

But he was still alive.

He was still able to fight.

He was still not willing to give up.

...All around him, the Crimson Spire was trembling and groaning, slowly starting to collapse.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny tiredly pushed himself off the ground. His body protested, but he forced it into silence and slowly rose to his feet. The blade of the Midnight Shard scraped against the stones as he pulled it up.

Nephis was doing the same.

The young woman stood up and staggered, then regained her balance and grew still. Her posture was slumped, with one hand pressed tightly against the deep wound on her abdomen.

Changing Star looked weak and beaten, her fearsome presence diminished. Her face was pale, bloodied, and grim, contorted by a grimace of suffering.

...Only her eyes, which burned with dimming white flames, were still the same — striking, cold, and full of unshakable resolve.

Both of them were washed in the ethereal light of the Gateway.

Looking at Neph through that light, Sunny slowly inhaled and said in a hoarse voice:

"...Let's finish this."

She stared at him for a few moments, then grinned.

Her teeth were painted red by blood.

In the next moment, Nephis raised her sword and dashed forward, sending a cloud of dust into the air with her feet.

They clashed beneath the eaves of the Gateway, their swords whistling through the air like hungry fiends. The clangor of steel drowned the sound of breaking stone, resounding in the darkness of the Crimspon Spire once again.

Both Sunny and Nephis were gruesomely wounded, but neither allowed their agony and pain to make them weaker. Instead, they fought with ruthless ferociousness, throwing everything they had left at the enemy, not holding anything back.

Now that Changing Star was bleeding heavily, the Blood Blossom hanging on Sunny's neck entered a state of frenzy. At times, it felt as though his sword moved on its own, helping him strike faster, harder, with deadlier precision.

He had never been as powerful as he was now.

...And yet, it was not enough.

Nephis was still too much for him to handle. She was still too strong, too fast, too overwhelming.

She was more like a monster than a human.

A demon of silver steel wreathed in pale white flames.

Sunny managed to add several deep cuts to her harrowing collection of injuries, but the damage he received in return was twice as terrible. His left arm was slowly growing numb, weakening his grip on the hilt of the Midnight Shard.

His lungs were burning, and it was getting harder and harder to inhale. With each breath, a wet, disturbing sound fell from his lips. His eyes were burning, too, his vision becoming blurry because of all the blood streaming into them. He had to rely on Shadow Sense a lot to make up for this debilitating affliction.

'I can't... I can't go on like this...'

He had to think of something. Something devious and smart, something that would work...

But, for the first time, Sunny's bag of tricks was empty.

No matter how much he thought, he couldn't imagine anything that would defeat Nephis.

She knew him too well. Better than anyone in the entire world.

Two worlds, even...

And yet, Sunny felt that he had no chance of victory if everything continued as it had. He was already just one step away from death.

And so, he did the one thing he could think of.

A desperate gamble with little chance of success.

Summoning all of his remaining strength and resilience, he forced his perception to shift... and started weaving the strange, taxing movements of the incomplete Shadow Dance into his technique.

He allowed his mind to become formless and shapeless, and then aimed it at Changing Star, trying to mimic her incredible battle art to the smallest detail.

And use it as a weapon to destroy her.

After all, if not Neph, then who could he ever imitate?

He was the person who knew her best in the world, too. He was her companion, friend, and pupil.

He was already practically her shadow, her compliant little helper. Caught in the net of her schemes, in her insane, insatiable desire, and incapable of breaking free — not only because there was no other choice, but also because he didn't really... didn't really want to be apart from her.

He knew her flowing, deadly battle style better than anyone except for Nephis herself. After all, he had practiced it as well, spending countless hours to master its foundation and gain insight into its principles. From repeating the same downward slash hundred of thousands of times to this terrible battle, he had never stopped learning from her.

If he had a chance to make that one final step to mastering the first level of Shadow Dance, it was in a fight against her.

And so Sunny fought, summoning the memory of the beautiful slave girl dancing with her seven shadows. He strained his already failing body to its limit, past the limit, trying to force it to perfectly reflect Changing Star's deadly grace and fearsome elegance.

Put under that strain, his body began to collapse.

Sunny felt as though there was something brittle in the center of his chest, a small part of his body that was slowly cracking under the pressure. With each move he made, a new crack appeared on its surface.

He just hoped that he would make the breakthrough before that small part exploded... if he could endure just a little more, do a little more, understand a little more...

But in the end, he didn't.

After another strange and excruciating move, one that somehow felt different from all the rest, the delicate thing in his chest suddenly shuddered, and broke.

For a moment, Sunny felt as a marionette whose strings had been cut. His eyes widened in horror.

And then, the Midnight Shard shivered slightly.

In the next second, the invisible well of power hidden in his souls opened, and a flood of rejuvenating strength carried his exhaustion away.

Chapter 349: Fate | Shadow Slave

When something in Sunny's chest shattered, the hidden enchantment of the Midnight Shard, [Unbroken], came into effect and opened the floodgates of power to support him in the desperate, defiant last stand.

...Of course, the Blood Weave was enhanced by it, too, boosting its restorative powers. The virtuous cycle was complete, simultaneously making him much stronger and bringing him away from death's doorstep.

Changing Star's sword whistled through the air, aiming to pierce his flesh... and was thrown aside by the forceful push of the austere tachi. For the first time since the beginning of their brutal fight, Sunny didn't reel because of the violent shock reverberating through his bones.

Now, he had reached the absolute pinnacle of his power potential. With his core fully saturated, the shadow wrapped around his body, the Blood Blossom filling his Memories with frenzied might, and the Unbroken enchantment of the stalwart blade doing the same for his body, Sunny was as strong as he would ever be before becoming an Awakened.

Now, he was finally able to match Nephis...

Almost.

Astoundingly, incredibly, irrationally, she was still stronger.

'How?! How, damn it?!'

Sunny moved and fought, blood seeping from his terrible wounds. Although the gap in power between him and Changing Star had diminished significantly, it was still there, making him miss his attacks by a fraction of a second, be too late to block and deflect by a hair's breadth.

He was still losing.

As the two of them clashed furiously, sparks of burning metal flying into the air from the point where their swords met, the light of the artificial sun had grown dim and unstable, and the Crimson Spire continued to break apart.

At some point, an enormous piece of granite crashed into the vast balcony, showering them with a rain of sharp splinters. A net of cracks appeared on the stone surface beneath their feet, slowly widening as more debris fell down.

Both of them were thrown to the ground by the shockwave of the collision, but immediately got up, lunging at each other with dark, murderous determination. Sunny dodged the tip of the silver longsword and thrust his tachi forward, leaving a deep cut on Neph's forearm, slicing her muscles apart. At the same time, she made a step forward and slammed the pommel of her sword into his mauled clavicle, making Sunny's mind explode with pain.

He heard someone scream, their voice hoarse and full of indescribable suffering, then realized a moment later that that bestial voice was his own.

Soon, the scream turned into a growl.

He wasn't done yet. He refused to be defeated, he refused to give up...

He still had a chance to win.

...Because through all of this, Sunny had continued to push himself toward mastering the first step of the Shadow Dance.

Just before something shattered in his chest, thus causing the Midnight Shard to open the well of hidden power, he had sensed an approaching epiphany.

It was already there, at the precipice of his mind. But his body was not strong enough, not malleable enough to manifest it into reality.

Or at least it had not been before receiving the boon of the [Unbroken].

Now, everything changed. Sunny felt that he would be able to make a breakthrough with the help of the powerful enchantment. Every strike, every block, every step brought him closer to finally being able to complete the foundation of his elusive battle art, to bring his vision of it to fruition.

Taking a pained breath, he deflected another vicious attack, hesitated for a split second... and looked away from Nephis.

Instead of watching her body and her movements, he instead gazed at her shadow.

The shadow shifted slightly, facing away from the glowing ring of the Gateway. Its shadow hands moved, raising a shadow sword. The shadow sword fell, aiming to cut the shadow's enemy down.

And suddenly, it felt as though a door opened in his mind.

Everything suddenly fell into place. Everything connected. What was fragmented and obscured before now became clear and whole. It was...

Complete.

Before Neph's sword could reach him, Sunny evaded it with a slight shift and raised the Midnight Shard.

A moment later, he delivered an identical strike, forcing her to retreat.

'...Like that?'

Changing Star was already attacking again, moving with speed and precision that seemed inhuman. Sunny mirrored her movements, and their blades collided in the air, causing a rain of sparks to fly down.

His style changed slightly, growing more graceful. Smooth, flowing. Deadly.

Just like hers.

'No, this is wrong.'

The point of Shadow Dance was not to mirror every movement, to become a literal copy. It was to understand the very essence of the enemy's style and turn it against them.

Sunny scowled and changed his grip on the Midnight Shard slightly, then attacked, manifesting the essence of Changing Star's technique into his own body. Suddenly, he was able to see her intentions with more clarity, understand the pattern of her steps better.

He was able to perform every action she had performed, but also those that she had not used yet. After all, he was not a reflection, but a shadow. He wasn't replicating Changing Star's movements; instead, he was replicating Changing Star herself.

The very heart of her battle technique.

Neph's eyes widened when she felt the sudden change in his style. When they clashed again, Sunny seemed to be able to mirror her every move, throwing the flow of combat into a violent turmoil. His movements were sharper, faster, filled with more meaningful intent.

Her attacks slowed down for a few moments, then grew even more violent and ferocious.

Only now, they seemed to be less measured, less... controlled.

It was as though she had lost her absolute grasp on the cadence of the battle, and was now compensating for it with brute strength.

Sunny suspected that the small advantage he had gained wasn't going to last long. Nephis was too smart and too gifted to allow this lack of understanding to persist. Soon, she was going to see through the guiding principle of his newly established style and adjust to resist it.

Even he couldn't predict what was going to happen then.

That is why, despite his best judgment, Sunny gritted his teeth and escalated his attacks, sacrificing any semblance of defense in the process.

This had to end fast.

...At first, he was able to see Neph's intentions with a considerable measure of clarity, allowing him to react to her attacks slightly before she started to move. When possible, he mirrored her strikes to throw the flow of the battle into chaos. His own came with a tiny delay, lagging behind the enemy by a fraction of a second.

Then, they happened at the same time.

And then, miraculously, his attacks started to come in advance of Changing Star's, even if the difference was barely perceptible.

That was all Sunny needed.

In the terrible crescendo of their merciless duel, blood fell to the cracking stone of the Gateway balcony like crimson rain.

He dashed forward, turning his torso sideways to let the silver longsword miss his chest and rip through his bicep instead. As a blinding wave of pain flooded his mind, Sunny caught Neph's arm with his own.

And then, twisting it, brought his fist on her elbow, shattering it.

As pieces of bloodied bone tore through her skin, Nephis shrieked terribly and made an awkward move, trying to smash him in the head with the flat of her sword. But because it was now only held in one hand, the force and speed of that strike were not as formidable as that of her previous attacks.

Diving under the blade of the silver longsword, Sunny fell to one knee...

And pushed the Midnight Shard forward in a horizontal cut, its blade tearing through Neph's abdomen and exiting in a flood of blood from her back.

Pulled by the inertia of her attack, Nephis made a step forward and came to a sudden stop. As the sword slid from her grip and clattered to the cold stones, she swayed a little.

And then fell heavily to the ground.

The radiance of her skin was slowly fading away.

With his back to her, Sunny stared into the darkness. After a few moments, he closed his eyes and sighed.

'...Over.'

A second or two later, he stood up, turned around, and walked toward the broken figure of the young woman, who was still trying to reach for her sword, blood spilling from her mouth.

As Sunny's shadow fell on Nephis, she gritted her teeth and spat:

"It's... it's not over yet... I still can... I can..."

Ruthlessly throwing the silver longword away with the tip of his boot, Sunny looked at her from above and said in a tired, listless voice:

"You can't. It's over, Neph."

Then, he looked away, at the shining dais of the Gateway. His face was hidden in the shadows.

"You're done."

He won.

Looking at the shining Gateway, Sunny tasted that word.

Why was it so bitter? Why was it so painful?

Why wasn't it sweet and joyous?

With a dark grimace, he glanced at Nephis, and then turned away.

What could he say to her that had any meaning? One of them was going to escape this hell, and the other was going to stay. One was victorious, and the other was defeated.

One of them was going to live, and the other was going to die.

Any words he could find would be empty...

But not empty enough to express the hollow sense in his heart.

His feet trembled as he made the first step toward the Gateway.

'...To hell with this!'

Why did his heart have to feel so heavy?! Why wasn't he celebrating?!

He deserved to be saved. He struggled and suffered to get to come this far, enduring countless horrors that would have broken and destroyed anyone else. He bled and fought, clawing his way to this point, never allowing himself to rest or stop growing. He — he! — was the strongest.

He was the last one left standing!

Not the countless Nightmare Creatures of the Forgotten Shore. Not Harus, that damned hunchback. Not Gunlaug, the mighty Bright Lord. Not Caster, the strongest even among other Legacies.

Not even Changing Star, the last daughter of the legendary Immortal Flace clan.

No, it was him. A homeless kid from the outskirts with no place to call his own, someone whom no one had ever expected to survive, let alone thrive in the ruthless embrace of the Nightmare Spell. Whom everyone considered to be below them, an inconsequential nobody with no chance of ever becoming anything else.

Well... he showed them all, had he not?

Gritting his teeth in anger, Sunny made another step.

'To hell with you!'

...Behind him, Nephis had finally abandoned her hopeless attempts to reach her sword. As Sunny walked away, she slowly crawled a few steps, then arduously pushed herself and sat up, leaning on a piece of rubble. The light of the Gateway reflected in her eyes as she watched him go, hunched, seemingly unable to move anymore.

Stepping over a wide crack in the stone that was slowly approaching the shimmering circle of runes, Sunny came to the iron ring.

Now, only one step separated him from freedom.

...But instead of making it, he suddenly froze, looking into the distance with a grim expression on his face.

A second passed by, then another. The Crimson Spire shuddered once again, sending more stone falling down.

As the light of the artificial sun grew so dim that it was almost impossible to see, Sunny swayed a little, then turned around and walked back to Nephis.

Stopping above her, he lingered for a moment, then kneeled, so that their faces were on the same level.

Looking Neph right in the eyes, Sunny raised his hands and clapped several times.

Finally, he said in a terrible, furious voice:

"Congratulations. You almost fooled me..."

Chapter 350: End of the Nightmare

Nephis stared at him tiredly, straining to understand his words.

The radiance was gone from beneath her skin, and instead of it, white flames had once again appeared, licking weakly at her wounds. However, their power was almost gone: instead of healing, all they could do now was stem the bleeding and prevent Changing Star from dying right there and then.

A few seconds later, she opened her mouth, letting blood flow over her lips, and said in a low, barely audible voice:

"What... are you talking about?"

Sunny snarled.

"Drop the act. Your performance was, indeed, masterful. But don't forget who taught you how to lie in the first place. Did you really think that you would be able to deceive me?"

She was silent for a few moments, then whispered:

"I don't... understand."

He looked at her and asked, his voice shaking with anger:

"Why did you do it? Why?"

Nephis blinked and drew in a shaky breath, but didn't say anything, looking at him with pain and confusion.

Realizing that she wasn't going to answer, Sunny spat:

"Why did you throw the fight?!"

She lingered for a moment, then said quietly:

"...I didn't."

A bitter smile appeared on Sunny's lips. Shaking his head, he said:

"You almost made it work, you know. I almost bought it! But after all of it was done and I could think clearly, some things really didn't add up. They didn't make any sense! No matter how I looked at it, something felt wrong."

The Spire swayed, drowning their voices in the sound of breaking stone. Not paying it any attention, Sunny continued:

"First! I know for a fact that you are somehow able to support two augmentations at the same time. You did so while fighting Gunlaug. One to enhance your sword, the other to enhance your body. I rarely forget things, so how could I not remember this? Once you were heavily injured, you summoned back the flames from the sword and were able to simultaneously strengthen yourself and heal those wounds. And yet, you only used one when fighting me. Funny, isn't it?"

Nephis stared at him, not saying anything. Then, she uttered:

"My powers were exhausted..."

Sunny spat.

"I would have believed that, maybe, if not for your other mistakes. Back at the top of the Spire, you had an opportunity to cut off my arm, ending the fight right there and then. That was the best course of action, the swiftest and most effective attack you could have performed. But instead, you chose a less advantageous method and went for my head, striking with the flat of the blade."

A grim expression appeared on his face.

"Someone else might have made that choice, but not you. Not Changing Star, the sword saint. The only reason for you to pass on that golden opportunity is that you never really wanted to win. Didn't you?"

He looked up and grimaced, pain assaulting his mind like a furious sea.

"...And finally, why did you even stay there at the top of the tower, waiting for me to come? If you wanted to escape, you could have gone to the Gateway as soon as you realized what the Soul Conduit was, not even giving me a chance to save myself. But you did not. You just sat there quietly and waited, ignoring your chance to reach the Gateway first. So... why?"

He looked at her and shouted, the pain finally finding its way into his voice:

"Why the hell did you pretend to go all out on me while planning to lose from the start?!"

Nephis stared at him for a while, her face pale and inexorable.

Then, she sighed and looked away.

After a moment, she said quietly:

"Maybe it is because I am far away from home, too."

Sunny stared at her for a couple of moments, then snarled.

"What? What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Changing Star turned her head and looked at him calmly, then smiled.

"Alright, Sunny. You caught me. Now go. This tower won't last much longer."

As she said that, the white flames flowing from her wounds suddenly flashed, growing stronger and brighter. Her injuries started to heal once again, not as fast as in the past, but still with considerable speed. Her eyes shined with fearsome radiance.

He gritted his teeth.

"Like hell I will! Not before you give me an answer."

Nephis shrugged tiredly, then looked him in the eyes.

"What it is that you want to know?"

Sunny clenched his fists.

"Why even fight me if you wanted to let me win all along?"

She sighed. As he stared at her with burning intensity, Neph said:

"Isn't it obvious? Because if I didn't, you wouldn't go."

Turning away, she lingered for a moment, and then continued:

"People... people are usually either cruel or kind. But not you. You can be both, depending on the situation. Either ruthless or compassionate. Either cruel or kind. So that's what I did. I created a situation that would allow you to be ruthless and cruel. To leave me behind without showing any mercy."

Sunny stared at her, his fists trembling.

"But why? Why would you doom yourself to save me? What happened to your goddamned goal?! Didn't you tell me that you will sacrifice anything, anyone, to achieve it?!"

Nephis looked at him and smiled bitterly.

"Why? Are you the only one who is allowed to grow and change? Can't I change too, Sunny?"

She turned away and said tiredly, her voice full of invisible, but crushing weight:

"...Yes. I did say such a thing. But saying and doing are two different things, Sunny. Once it all started... once all those people were dying because of what I have done... once I suffered defeat after defeat... it was more difficult than I could ever imagine. It was... distasteful."

He shook his head in shock.

"So... that's it? You just gave up? After all that crap, you just decided that it was too much for you?"

Changing Star remained quiet for a bit, then slowly shook her head.

"...You don't really understand me at all, do you, Sunny?"

Facing him, she grinned.

"Give up? No, I didn't give up. I didn't abandon my goal. I just realized that I was not ambitious enough."

As white flames grew brighter in her eyes, Nephis said:

"I am going to destroy the Spell, and all those who stand in my way. I will accomplish everything that I want. But I will also do it in the way that I want. I will do it in a way that suits my desire, without compromising anything. Without sacrificing my sense of right and wrong."

Illuminated by white radiance, her pale, bloodied face seemed like a face of a demon.

"Manipulating all those people, causing their deaths? I would do it again. I would kill more if I needed to. Because it was fair and right. I gave them the chance to save themselves, or die fighting against the Spell. There is no better way."

For a moment, her eyes were aflame with passion. However, then, her expression suddenly changed. Looking down, Nephis added in a quiet voice:

"...But abandoning you here would be vile, and wrong. It would leave a bad taste in my mouth. Just like leaving a helpless blind girl to die alone would. I won't do it. If I do, I would be no better than those who I want to destroy. What's the point of reaching my goal if, in the process, I become the same as those whom I hate?"

She pierced him with a burning gaze and said:

"No, Sunny. My goal hasn't changed. It's just that reaching by using a wrong path is worse than not reaching it at all. But why do you care, anyway? Don't you think that it is insane? Don't you think that I am despicable and vile? So, go! Why are you hesitating?!"

Sunny stared at her, a deep frown appearing on his face. Finally, he asked:

"I'm hesitating because of you, fool. What about you?"

Nephis smiled.

"What about me? Do you think I will die here, in this tower? No. I will... I will be fine. I will escape it and survive, somehow. I'll find another way out. No matter how long it's going to take me, I will. Nothing will stop me. You know it won't..."

He stared at her for a while, then glanced at the shimmering Gateway.

The crack traveling through the stone balcony was already almost upon the circle of runes, threatening to destroy them.

...Salvation was so close.

He could almost taste it.

Turning away from the dais, Sunny shook his head.

"That is a horrible plan. You want to travel around the Dream Realm battling Nightmare Creatures? Fine. Let's do it together. We can try to go through the Hollow Mountains and reach the human Citadels on the other side. And that's just the south. We can also try north, east, and west, searching for an unclaimed Gateway. Two of us will have a better chance to survive. The two of us, together... it's better than being alone. Right?"

She hesitated for a long time, then closed her eyes and slowly shook her head. When she spoke, her voice was wistful and tired:

"...No. I can't. I can't let you stay, Sunny. Go! Go and meet your sister. There's something waiting for you in the real world, at least. All that's

waiting for me is emptiness, bloodshed, and graves. If I return, the same thing that happened in the Bright Castle will repeat itself, over and over again, until there's nothing else. So go while you can."

The runes of the Gateway shimmered, as if on the verge of disappearing.

He gritted his teeth.

"...No."

Nephis opened her eyes and looked at him, a sense of sorrow appearing on her face.

"Leave me, Sunny. Please. Go."

He shook his head stubbornly.

"I don't want to."

Changing Star was silent for a moment, looking at him with a pained expression. And then she said, making his world crumble:

"Go... Lost from Light."

His eyes widened.

Deep within his soul, something moved and rose from slumber, triumphant. Unbreakable, eternal, irresistible. Complete, perfect, and sweet.

...Before Sunny knew what he was doing, his hand shot forward, the ghostly blade of the Moonlight Shard appearing in it.

"Stop."

His hand froze, the tip of the stiletto mere centimeters away from Neph's eye.

Trembling, he looked at his arm and willed it to move forward.

But it didn't. It didn't move at all. It was as though that hand did not belong to him anymore.

As deep horror drowned his heart, Sunny moved his gaze and looked at Nephis, his eyes wide with shock.

"H... how..."

A sad smile appeared on her lips.

"How did I know? ...Cassie told me."

Neph sighed and looked away.

"She was the first one to understand the meaning of her vision. She knew that the two of us will end up fighting each other, and that I was going to lose. Maybe even die. She just didn't know how, when, and why. So, Cassie told me your secret, in hopes that it will save my life one day. But I... I hoped that I would never have to use it."

Sunny stared at her, too shocked to say anything. She smiled sadly.

"So, then. I guess... I guess this is goodbye. Ta... I hope that you'll take care of yourself, Sunny. Now, go. Escape before it is too late.'

Even though Sunny didn't do anything, his body moved on its own. Standing up, he turned around and walked toward the shining ring of the Gateway.

Step, step. Another step.

'Stop. Stop!'

But his body would not listen. It just continued to move forward, indifferent to his commands. A dull ache settled somewhere in the center of his heart.

'Stop!'

There was nothing he could do. He was a miraculous shadow bound to a master; once the master gave a command, he had no choice but to obey.

Sunny slowly walked up the steps of the dais and approached the circle of runes, then crossed the iron ring without slowing down. As soon as he did, the runes shone with intense light.

His body began to glow, too.

'No! I refuse!'

The ethereal radiance grew brighter and brighter, until it became hard to discern the human figure in its middle.

'No!'

...And then, suddenly, it disappeared, leaving only emptiness behind.

Sunny was gone, finally free of this long and arduous nightmare. The journey back to reality that had taken him more than a year was now over.

He made it out alive.

Just a few seconds after he disappeared in a flash of light, the crack in the stone reached the circle of runes and broke it.

The shine of the Gateway grew unstable and swiftly faded away.

At the same time, the artificial sun of the Forgotten Shore ignited one last time with a bright, intense explosion of light, and then extinguished.

...Left alone in the collapsing tower and with no more light to shine upon her, the beaten, broken figure of Changing Star disappeared into the shadows.

[End of volume two: Demon of Change.]

Chapter 351: Once Again | Shadow Slave

Once again, Sunny found himself in the endless space between dream of reality. All around him, there was nothing but a boundless black void, which was illuminated by a myriad of bright stars. Between those stars, countless strings of silver light were woven into a beautiful and inconceivably complex pattern.

Once again, he felt as though he had glimpsed the inner workings of the Spell. Was it just an illusion, or was he able to see more now? It was almost as if his eyes were now able to discern a hint of meaning behind the unimaginable, titanic brilliance of the ethereal weave.

...He had the eyes of Weaver now, after all.

With a pained moan, Sunny forced himself to look away from the strings of silver light. The magnitude of the secret hidden in this cosmic pattern was so immense that just thinking about it could drive him mad. The Forgotten Shore had taught him an important lesson, and it was that one had to be careful about what they looked upon.

Some things were not meant to be seen by humans.

...Not to mention that he had other things to think about.

"Curse it! Curse it all! Curse all of you!"

His voice disappeared into the darkness, full of indescribable fury, bitterness, and sorrow. No one was there to hear it... except for the Spell, which chose to tactfully remain silent.

Breathing heavily, Sunny clenched his fists and closed his eyes.

He didn't know what brought him more rage and pain — the fact that he had lost Neph, or the fact that his secret had been revealed. Both were too bitter to swallow.

All that time, all that suffering... and for what? He had outsmarted and defeated so many powerful enemies, only for his True Name to be discovered by an ungrateful, weak, blind girl?!

After everything he had done for her...

Cassie's betrayal, perhaps, had hurt him the most.

"Curse her..."

Once again, he was a slave. He made a full circle and returned exactly to where he had started. In shackles. Only instead of nameless slavers, Nephis had become his master now.

Nephis...

Sunny gritted his teeth and groaned, a storm of conflicting emotions tearing his heart apart.

'Why did she have to do it... why...'

The pain of losing her, the hope of finding her again... was just as strong and overwhelming as the hope that she would die and disappear forever in the unforgiving hell of the Dream Realm, so that they would never have to meet again.

So that he would be free.

He clawed at his face, not knowing how to process this conflagration of feelings. For someone who had spent most of his life alone, not caring for anything, this was all just too much.

Luckily, time in this boundless void was a strange concept, so he had an eternity to try and come to terms with his new reality. The Spell kept silent, as though giving him a chance to do just that.

After a while — maybe hours, or maybe days, or maybe just a single second — Sunny sighed.

Some time later, he opened his mouth and whispered:

"...I won."

He had survived. Who could have thought?

Slightly more than a year ago, he was thrown into a region of the Dream Realm that no human had ever escaped, and now, he was not only returning to reality, but also doing so as one of the most powerful Sleepers in the history of the human race.

Maybe even the strongest one.

...Or the second strongest.

He had survived countless horrors, crossed a cursed sea on a boat made of demon bones, slew hundreds of Nightmare Creatures, gained experience and scars worthy of a lifetime, touched the hidden knowledge of the gods, saw a tyrant die and a new one be crowned, banished an ancient curse into the darkness of oblivion and watched as a sun died.

And now, he was about to become an Awakened. An elite among elites, a person at the very top of society, one with access to the best food, the most wealth, the highest forms of prestige. The highest... everything.

All his dreams were going to come true.

All his suffering would now be rewarded.

"I will not be sad, I will not be bitter, I will not be angry. Who should I?"

Had he gone through this nightmare to be left heartbroken on the other side? No. He had earned this joy, this delight, this triumph...

And he was going to enjoy it.

Slowly, a shaky smile appeared on Sunny's face. At first, he had to force himself, but after a while, the smile became sincere.

"That's right. Victory is supposed to be sweet. So, let's see... what should I start with?"

As if answering him, the Spell finally spoke. Its voice sounded a little strange, as if it was continuing a sentence after being interrupted:

[...Your shadow is overflowing with power.]

[Your shadow is taking shape.]

Suddenly, Sunny felt his soul begin to radiate a strange heat once again.

'Crap...'

[Your shadow is complete.]

Something inside of him exploded, drowning his whole being with indescribably suffering. With a startled yelp, Sunny fell down.

'How come... how come I end up on my ass every time I come to this place...'

The first time Sunny had appeared in the void, he was so shocked to discover the Divine Rank of his Aspect that his legs buckled. And now, due to the painful transformation happening to his soul, he ended up in the same situation again.

Because he had left the Crimson Spire, the [Soul Conduit] Attribute was gone. And without its interference, the strange process that had begun due to the saturation of the Shadow Core was finally able to continue.

It was just as painful as Sunny remembered.

Gritting his teeth to prevent himself from screaming, Sunny tried to endure that terrible agony. He was no stranger to physical pain, but this was something different. It came from the soul itself, and for that reason, was so much worse.

'Argh, damn it all!'

However, it was still not nearly as bad as the chilling torture he had gone through after consuming the drop of Weaver's blood, or the nightmare he had endured after meeting the Black Knight for the first time.

And it didn't last as long.

After a while, the pain lessened, and then finally disappeared, leaving him feeling refreshed and whole again.

Sunny carefully stood up and looked down, checking to see if he was still in one piece.

He felt... stronger. Much, much stronger.

Stronger, faster, more resilient. Very much so.

He felt so powerful, in fact, that for a moment Sunny even entertained the idea that he had subconsciously commanded his shadow to wrap itself around his body, and was now enjoying the effect of its augmentation.

To make sure that this wasn't the case, he habitually glance down to check on the shadow.

...And froze.

'What... the hell?'

The shadow was not wrapped around his body. It was where it was supposed to be, on the unseen surface Sunny was standing on, somehow visible despite the darkness of the black void.

But it wasn't alone.

Two identical shadows were currently staring back at Sunny.

One seemed sulking and morose, and the other appeared to be joyful and friendly.

Chapter 352: Monster Core | Shadow Slave

Sunny stared at the two shadows, dumbfounded. After a while, he said in an uncertain tone:

"Am I... am I seeing things, or are there two of you?"

The shadows, of course, did not answer. They had no vocal cords, after all. However, the sulking one looked at him with contempt and shook its head in derision. The friendly one, meanwhile, looked down shyly and slightly shrugged.

'What is going on?'

Frowning, Sunny lingered for some time, and then dove into the Soul Sea. With the [Soul Conduit] Attribute gone, it was back to its usual, tenebrous appearance. The surface of the water was tranquil and still, and hundreds of motionless shadows stood silently in the darkness. Above him, shining spheres containing the Memories were circling around the...

Sunny raised his head, then flinched.

Where the black sun of the Shadow Core had once loomed above the quiet sea, there was now... two.

Two identical Shadow Cores hovered in the dark sky, shining with lightless black radiance.

He blinked.

'Two... there's two of them.'

A few minutes passed, or at least something that felt like a few minutes.

'There's two... I have two cores... why do I have two cores?'

Humans only ever had one soul core. That was a fact. Only Nightmare Creatures had more...

Sunny looked down at his hands, then made them into fists, feeling newly gained strength course through his muscles. Then, he scowled and looked up again.

"Your shadow is taking shape, your shadow is complete..."

So the Spell was not speaking about the bad-tempered shadow that had accompanied him for so long. Initially, Sunny had assumed that the shadow — and his core — were going through a transformation due to the acquisition of the thousandth fragment, perhaps evolving or even Awakening. But the Spell actually meant to say that his second shadow, and thus a second Shadow Core, were complete.

They had been assembled from the thousand shadow fragments he had collected.

Making him a... what?

Sunny hesitated for a bit, then ordered the shadows to wrap themselves around his body. The sulking one seemingly rolled its eyes before obeying the command; the friendly one seemed extremely delighted to do as he asked.

Both flowed up and covered his body. Immediately, Sunny felt his already considerable strength double...

And then triple.

His mouth hung open.

'Too powerful... this is too powerful...'

This was incredible!

To experiment further, he commanded one of the shadows to return to the surface of the tranquil water. A moment later, he had a shadow once again,

but still enjoyed the familiar augmentation, even if it grew weaker, returning to its previous strength.

He then summoned the Midnight Shard and ordered the second shadow to wrap itself around its blade. Now, both his body and his sword were augmented. Then, he sent the sulking shadow to join the friendly one. His body was not enhanced anymore, but the austere tachi felt much sharper, more lethal, more... deadly.

Finally, he commanded one shadow to leave the Midnight Shard and cover the Puppeteer's Shroud.

Two Memories were augmented at the same time.

'Holy hell...'

This was just too good. Sunny stood silently for a while, staring into the distance.

So this was it... this was the most unique, most powerful side of his Aspect. A Divine Aspect, after all, was not necessarily more powerful than a lesser one.

But it had much more potential.

With the second core and a second shadow, the gap between Sunny and the other Awakened was going to increase. And if he was right about it... if he was right, this was only the beginning. Because if there was a second core, there would most like be the third one, and then the fourth...

Suddenly, it all made sense.

Why Nephis never seemed to be able to saturate her soul core, no matter how many shards she absorbed, no matter how many Nightmare Creatures and humans she slew. Why she had been incapacitated after killing Gunlaug. Why she was so much stronger, faster, and more powerful than him, even at his peak.

...It was because her Aspect was Divine, just like his. But she had discovered its secret much sooner than him.

As a dull pain appeared in his heart, Sunny banished the image of Changing Star from his mind and summoned the runes.

He had to make sure that his guess was right.

Name: Sunless.

True Name: Lost from Light.

Rank: Dreamer.

Below that, new runes were shimmering in the darkness. Sunny's eyes widened.

Class: Monster.

Shadow Cores: [2/7].

He stared at the glowing runes, his face calm, his heart engulfed by a dark fire.

...Monster. Two out of seven.

He was right, after all. His progression path was indeed different from all of humanity. It was harder, larger... but also so much more promising.

The promise of it was as vast as it was frightening. He was reluctant to even try to imagine the pinnacle of what he would potentially be able to achieve.

The possibilities were simply limitless.

What would a human with seven cores and the might of a titan be capable of? What obstacles would they be unable to conquer? Who would dare to stand in their way?

...Who would dare to call them their slave?

Of course, the road to creating five more cores would be long and arduous. It would take him years, if not decades. If he even manages to live that long. In fact, the magnitude and scale of such an ambition were nothing short of insane. After all, the stronger he grows, the stronger enemies he would have to face to collect their shadow fragments. It seemed all but impossible.

...Almost.

Was he really going to try?

After some time, Sunny lowered his gaze and continued to read the runes. His face looked like that of a madman — there were simultaneously a deep frown and a wide smile somehow coexisting on it, making for a strange sight.

But then, the wide smile disappeared, leaving only the frown behind.

There was something even more important waiting for him in the glow of ethereal runes. Something even more frightening.

Reaching the lowest part of the field of runes, he read:

Aspect: [Shadow Slave].

Aspect Rank: Divine.

Aspect Description: [You are a miraculous shadow left behind by a dead god. As a divine shadow, you possess plenty of strange and wondrous powers. However, your existence is empty and lonesome; you mourn the passing of your former master and long to find a new one.]

Right beneath it was the description of the part of the Aspect that had cursed his life, turning it into a nightmare:

Innate Ability: [Shadow Bond].

Ability Description: [Find a worthy master and let them know your True Name. Once they recite it out loud, you will be bound to their will, unable

to disobey any command. It is improper for a shadow, let alone a divine one, to walk around without a master.]

...However, the runes describing Shadow Bond were grey and lifeless, as though the Ability was now inactive.

'...Makes sense.'

He had a master now, after all. He wasn't free to walk around without one anymore.

And speaking of it...

Right below, new runes were now shining in the darkness:

Master: Changing Star.

Sunny stared at those three words for a long time.

Who knew that just three words could bear such a crushing weight?

Such a vast and complicated meaning...

Finally, he shook his head slightly and concentrated, making the runes shine brighter, new ones appearing out of nowhere as he watched:

Name: Nephis.

True Name: Changing Star.

Rank: Dreamer.

Class: Demon...

Chapter 353: Light Bringer | Shadow Slave

The runes shimmered in the tranquil darkness of the silent sea.

Name: Nephis.

True Name: Changing Star.

Just as Sunny had suspected, that True Name hid many meanings. It didn't describe a star that was always changing, but instead a star that caused change. However, there were a lot of words for change in the runic language, each hiding a unique meaning.

The one used here meant a cataclysmic change that brought ruin and disaster; sometimes bad and sometimes good, but always cruel and calamitous, wreathed in misfortune.

So, in a sense, Nephis was neither a Star of Change nor a Star of Ruin, but both; the two went hand in hand, inseparable, destined to bring both salvation and damnation to those touched by her light.

...Just like what had happened to the doomed Dreamers of the Dark City.

The Spell was really good at giving names, it seemed.

Thinking of his own True Name somberly, Sunny read further:

Rank: Dreamer.

Class: Demon.

Soul Cores: [3/7].

Soul Fragments: [2749/3000].

He stared at the last two strings, a dark expression written on his face.

'So this... this is how far ahead of me you are.'

Then, with a heavy sigh, he looked away.

Many events of the past few months made sense now. During the fight against Gunlaug, Nephis had already been a Dormant Monster — just like he was right now, a Dreamer in possession of two Cores. It was because she had known that killing the Bright Lord would push her toward the third that she asked him to prevent Caster from attacking her in that moment of weakness.

...And in the time since, Changing Star had almost reached the fourth.

'How was she so fast?'

Sunny had made a conscious choice to avoid saturating his core during the civil war in the Bright Castle. In hindsight, this decision had turned out to be a wrong one... or maybe not. If he had collected all thousand shadow fragments back then, he might have been dead already, killed by one of Tessai's Guards or a Nightmare Creature while completely incapacitated by the formation of the second Shadow Core.

Hell, he would have been crushed to death by a piece of falling granite if not for the [Soul Conduit] suppressing the process at the best possible moment.

...Just as always, terrible misfortune had come together with incredible luck.

But even if he had come to possess the Monster Core back then, he would have never managed to create a third, let alone get this close to the fourth one.

It was because Nephis had one big advantage over him in the matter of collecting essence.

Like every Awakened except for Sunny, she received a certain portion of the enemy's accumulated soul essence when killing a fellow human, while

he received only a single shadow fragment... or a few, at best, if the enemy was of the higher Rank than him. Which hadn't happened yet, but was inevitably going to, considering his luck.

The war against Tessai and Gemma must have been a true feast for Changing Star. Especially when slaying those experienced members of the Host that had long saturated their cores themselves.

She was always on the frontline, after all. Fighting, killing, leading her followers...

Sunny grimly stared into the darkness for a while, then slowly turned back to the runes. His eyes slid lower...

Memories: [Dream Blade], [Starlight Legion Armor], [Dawn Shard], [Dark Wing], [Nameless Sun]...

There were a few utility Memories, too, including [Evertwine] — the golden rope he knew so well. But Sunny did not pay them a lot of attention. His sight was attracted to the Nameless Sun. What was that Memory and why hadn't he seen or heard of it before?

Memory: [Nameless Sun].

Memory Rank: Ascended.

Memory Tier: VI.

Memory Type: Weapon.

Memory Description: [For a long time, the Nameless Sun suffered in solitude, longing for all the things that were lost. Only when she lost that longing, too, was the Crimson Terror of the Forgotten Shore finally born.]

His eyes narrowed.

'So... she received a Memory after killing the Vessel, after all.'

An Ascended weapon of the sixth tier... Sunny wished that he could see its weave and learn what enchantments that terrible Memory held. Whatever they were, however, the Nameless Sun was bound to be extremely powerful.

But was it enough to help Nephis survive in the ruthless hellscape of the Dream Realm? He did not know.

Frowning, Sunny continued to read the runes.

Echoes: —

Attributes: [Dreamspawn], [Nephilim], [Flame of Divinity], [The Fire].

[Dreamspawn] Attribute Description: "You are born of two worlds, belonging to both, but welcomed in neither. Your soul exists on the edge between nightmare and reality."

[Nephilim] Attribute Description: "There once were terrible creatures born of an unholy union between the divine and the profane. Nephilim were the most beautiful, and the most harrowing of them all."

[Flame of Divinity] Attribute Description: "Your soul is aflame with the light of divinity."

[The Fire] Attribute Description: "You have inherited the lineage of Sun God."

He hesitated for a bit, studying Neph's Attributes.

'So that's how it is...'

Sunny had always wondered what was her innate Attribute — the one that was at the center of all the rest, the core of her being, just like his [Fated] trait. He often thought that it was tied to drive, battle prowess, or will.

But it was not.

Instead, Neph's innate Attribute was called [Dreamspawn] and tied to her nature as a child of a Hollow mother. In a sense, she was connected to the Dream Realm — and the Nightmare Spell — from before she had even been born.

Her core trait was duality.

If his guess was correct, that duality was further expressed after Nephis had conquered her First Nightmare and received her Aspect, as well as a new Attribute — [Nephilim]. Once again, it described a half-blood creature: half divine, half profane.

Half deific, half... Unknown?

Suddenly, he remembered how Changing Star had stopped and stared at the depiction of a radiant being engraved into the walls of the ancient mine below the Hollow Mountains.

Was that creature one of the nephilim? Or a fallen angel, from whom nephilim were supposed to be born? After all, the similarity between that creature and her own powers was hard to deny.

And then there was the last Attribute, [The Fire].

Sunny rubbed his face.

A Lineage Attribute, somewhat similar to his own Blood Weave. Finally, the meaning behind that word became clear: Lineage Memories akin to the [Drop of Ichor] were able to impart Awakened with unique Attributes that, unlike the usual ones, seemed to be hereditary. They could be passed down through a bloodline, and at least one of the great Legacy clans — the almost destroyed Immortal Flame — possessed one.

Did all great Legacy clans — like Song or Valor — possessed one, too? Was that what allowed them to rise to the very top of humanity and claim their place as great clans, in the first place?

'Those bastards have so many secrets.'

Sunny also couldn't help but notice a slight difference between [Blood Weave] and [The Fire]. While the latter was described simply as "lineage", the former was described as a "forbidden lineage".

What exactly made Blood Weave forbidden? Was it because it didn't come from a proper deity like Sun God, but from mysterious Weaver, who was a daemon? Had no one except for gods been allowed to leave behind a Lineage?

The Blood Weave was also described as a "partial" lineage, while The Fire was not.

"Questions, questions..."

With a sigh, Sunny turned to the runes once again.

Aspect: [Light Bringer].

Aspect Rank: Divine.

Aspect Description: [You are a creature of light that was banished and doomed to exist in the darkness. You bring radiance and warmth to wherever you go, but with it comes indescribable longing.]

Aspect Ability: [Soul Flame].

Ability Description: [Your soul burns with the purest of flames. That flame can both restore and destroy, and is both a blessing and a curse.]

Innate Ability: [Halfbreed.]

Ability Descriptions: [You can directly absorb a portion of the soul essence of any Nightmare Creature destroyed by your flames, as well as of any human.]

Flaw: [Pristine Soul].

Flaw Description: [You must suffer to use your power.]

Sunny dismissed the runes and was motionless for a while, thinking.

The name of the Aspect, Light Bringer, could be translated in several ways. The first rune could mean both light and fire, and the second meant either to bring or to bear, depending on context. So it could have been Fire Bearer as well, not that it made any difference.

The rest he had already known or suspected, so it didn't surprise him much. Only the strange Innate Ability, Halbreed, was somewhat new. Nephis had mentioned once that she was capable of doing something like that, but without sharing any details.

It was also funny that the name of her Flaw was Pristine Soul, while his was Clear Conscience. What a pair they were, one lost from light, the other the source of it.

...One a master, the other a slave.

He gritted his teeth and closed his eyes for a second.

What else was there to note?

The [Soul Conduit] Attribute was gone. It seemed that the artificial sun or the Crimson Spire itself had sustained too much damage and collapsed, thus removing it. He had escaped just in time.

'I guess there's not a lot of secrets left between us now.'

Sunny was sure that there was a new rune that Nephis could summon, one reading "Slave". Just like he now had access to all the information about her, she was going to learn everything about him.

The unique nature of his cores, the shadow fragments, the true identity of the Marble Saint, the Weaver's Mask... she was going to know it all.

That could potentially complicate...

Before he could finish that thought, however, the Spell spoke again, its voice filling the black void with melodious whispers:

[The Second Seal is broken.]

[Awakening dormant powers...]

'Oh, crap! I almost forgot!'

Sunny stared into the void with wide eyes.

He was about to Awaken.

Chapter 354: Awakening | Shadow Slave

Just like after the First Nightmare, Sunny suddenly sensed something waking up within him. Back then, it felt as though this new power came from inside his soul as opposed to some external source. This time the feeling was very similar, only more intense, more defined.

It was coming from his Shadow Cores.

They were radiating an ethereal, but almost palpable heat. The energy was circulating through his entire body, changing it, making it stronger. It was somewhat similar to the strange feeling he got every time he received a shadow fragment, but so much more powerful.

...A thousand times more powerful.

And deeper, too.

With a barely audible gasp, Sunny slowly sat down and crossed his legs, then closed his eyes, concentrating on the transformation.

Every fiber of his being was soon full of the mysterious energy. The familiar euphoric feeling overwhelmed him, washing over his mind like a warm wave. However, Sunny wanted to feel more, understand more. He wanted to remember this moment in every detail.

It was his triumph, after all.

Beneath the physical changes that his body was undergoing to become better, stronger, more perfect... was another, subtle, but equally incredible change.

It was happening to his soul.

Sunny had no words to describe it, but knew that he had never experienced anything as wonderful. The transformation of his soul was not at all painful, like the creation of the second Shadow Core had been, and not nearly as

torturous as the agony that consuming a drop of divine blood had caused him.

It felt... natural, right, and profound. As though he was coming one step closer to becoming complete, to what he had always been meant to be.

A better being.

Soon, the pulsating waves of heat retreated, replaced by a wave of soothing coldness. The dull ache in his heart that had remained there, unnoticed, ever since leaving the Forgotten Shore lessened a little. His mind became calm and tranquil.

Sunny felt like... like a sword that had been tempered and fortified in a fiery crucible, a being made of cold, pure, resilient steel.

He exhaled slowly and opened his eyes.

His body felt stronger, faster, and more enduring, similar to how he felt when wrapped in the shadow. The change was sufficiently pronounced, and he knew that it would only grow greater if he used one or both of the shadows to actually augment him.

But it wasn't the main difference.

Sunny knew that the actual quality that separated Awakened from the Dreamers was not physical might, but a new innate ability. Just like Dreamers gained the ability to sense and interact with soul cores, the Awakened could do the same with soul essence.

But knowing and feeling were two different things.

Before, he could vaguely feel his Shadow Core. The feeling was elusive and ethereal, but unmistakable. He felt its emptiness at the start of his journey, and felt it brimming with power near the end.

Now, that power wasn't contained inside the Shadow Cores anymore, but broke free, flowing naturally through his entire body. It circulated slowly,

coming and going from the cores, passively saturating his bones and muscles with power.

Sunny instinctually felt that, with some practice, he would be able to direct the flow of shadow essence to concentrate it in a certain area. He could expend some amount of essence to give his arms incredible, explosive strength for a short amount of time, or feel his legs with the power to jump a dozen meters into the air.

In short, it wasn't as though he had become monstrously strong and would be all the time, crashing through walls and breaking delicate things by accident. Instead, by wisely controlling his shadow essence, he would be able to gift himself short bursts of truly inhuman physical might. The rest of the time, he would enjoy a much smaller, but still considerable passive effect of his body being saturated with freely flowing essence.

'More training...'

Sunny could now control the shadow essence by instinct, but if he wanted to truly master it and do it more efficiently, he would have to learn from experienced Awakened. Some instructors at the Academy existed for the sole purpose of teaching newly Awakened just that, after all.

And then there was a whole another layer of combat strategy that he would have to understand and master.

Sleepers thought much like mundane humans, only with more power and tools. But battles of the Awakened were much more tactical. While essence always restored itself to the core's maximum capacity, it took time. In the reality of a battle, it was a finite resource. Because of it, one had to be smart and careful about how and when to use it.

He would also have to absorb as many shadow fragments as possible to increase the capacity of his cores. Luckily, he now had two of them, which already gave him a big advantage over the rest of the Awakened.

But this new amazing quality he had received was not the end of the Awakening. The main event was yet to happen...

The Spell spoke again, filling him with anticipation.

[Awakening Aspect Ability...]

[...Aspect Ability acquired.]

[Aspect Ability Name: Shadow Step.]

Sunny blinked, then hurriedly summoned the runes.

Name: Sunless.

True Name: Lost from Light.

Rank: Awakened.

Class: Monster.

Shadow Cores: [2/7].

Shadow Fragments: [0/2000].

Just as expected, both of his cores were not Dormant anymore, instead becoming Awakened. The shadow fragments were consumed to fuel the Awakening, bringing him to a stark and sad zero.

'A thousand fragments, gone just like that...'

He wasn't really disappointed, though. The amount of essence consumed during the Awakening directly corresponded to the starting capacity of the core, and thus, the extent of the physical transformation that a Sleeper would go through.

By collecting a thousand fragments and fully saturating his first core, Sunny not only received a second one, but also made sure to gain the best benefits a Sleeper could dream of. Very few Awakened had ever fully saturated their cores before returning from their first journey to the Dream Realm, and now, Sunny was one of them.

The difference was not drastic, but every little bit of power counted in a life-and-death situation.

'Enough stalling!'

Impatient, he banished the thoughts of cores and shadow fragments and found the description of his new Aspect Ability.

Aspect Ability: [Shadow Step].

Ability Description: [You can move freely between shadows, traveling from one to another in an instant.]

Looking at the shimmering runes, Sunny soon discovered that there was a stupid grin on his face.

'Teleportation... that's teleportation, right?'

That was, without a doubt, a form of teleportation.

An ability such as this was a game changer. His mobility would become truly incredible. Not only would he be able to apply it to traversal, making his future ventures into the Dream Realm easier and safer, but it could also play a decisive role in a battle.

What was more deadly than an assassin capable of appearing out of nowhere and disappearing from sight in a blink of an eye?

Not many things, really...

Of course, he would have to experiment and learn the true extent of this amazing Ability... what was its range, for example? Would he be able to jump to any shadow in sight, or to any shadow in the range of his Shadow Sense? Did a shadow have to be deep and large enough for him to fit through, or would even the smallest and faintest of them do?

And what about his own shadows? Would he be able to send one to a certain spot, and then step out of it, just like Saint usually did?

He couldn't wait to learn.

But before that, there were two other things he had to see.

One was the new Memory he acquired. The other one — and the one that filled him with nervous anticipation — was much more important.

It was the relic he was supposed to receive for mastering the first step of the Shadow Dance.

With a Legacy Relic in his hands and a Lineage Attribute coursing through his blood, Sunny would be theoretically eligible to create his own Legacy Clan. A great clan, even!

...Not that he was planning to.

But before Sunny could glance at the corresponding runes, the Spell suddenly whispered into his ear:

[Wake up, Sunless!]

And instantly, the black void full of bright stars and silver light disappeared.

Chapter 355: Back to Reality

On one of the underground levels of the Academy hospital complex, in a small room that was filled with the massive rectangle of the dream pod and various pieces of medical equipment, a delicate girl with pale blond hair was sleeping beneath the transparent glass lid, her face surrounded by wisps of cold vapor.

Suddenly, a series of lights ignited on the surface of the pod, and the medical machinery in the room came to life, producing various noises.

A few moments later, the girl opened her striking blue eyes and screamed.

...On a top floor of a private care facility in the center of a city, in a spacious room with tall windows and a luxurious interior, a state-of-the-art sleeping pod stood silently, bathed in sunlight. An attending nurse sat in a comfortable chair beside it, monitoring the vital signs of a beautiful young man who slumbered inside.

For the past three years, there had not been a single minute when the young man was left alone. His pod was surrounded by fresh flowers, and someone was always there to keep watch.

For three years, the flowers and nurses came and went, but the young man had remained the same. Nothing about him ever changed.

Suddenly, the nurse opened her eyes wide.

A second later, the sleeping pod shone with bright light. Its lid swiftly slid sideways and hid in a special housing slot.

The figure inside was slowly raising in the air, as if pulled up by an invisible force. The beautiful young man was... levitating.

The nurse remained motionless for a few seconds, stunned. Then, she hastily ran to the panel on the wall and pressed a call button.

...In a small apartment in one of the less prestigious areas of the city, in a tiny room, a tall young woman was lying in an old and barely functioning pod. This one was possibly the last representative of its model, taken out of production a long time ago. Still, it seemed like the most luxurious thing in the apartment, by far.

The door of the room was open, letting in the sound of a news broadcast. A pleasant and confident tone was currently saying:

"...unusual number of Awakenings! Dear viewers, we... we are currently receiving a report from our correspondents, and will be able to update you on this event shortly. The representatives of the great Legacy Clans, meanwhile..."

Suddenly, the sound of the broadcast was cut out, replaced by a heavy, hopeless silence.

Soon, the sound of tentative steps could be heard, approaching the room where the pod stood.

Just a second later, however, a fist slammed into the armored glass of its lid from inside, sending a net of cracks through it.

...Back in the Academy, in a room identical to the first one, the lights suddenly blinked and then went out. It was now shrouded in absolute darkness.

Something crashed down with a thunderous noise, and then, a pained human voice hissed:

"Damnation!"

A moment later, the lights came back, revealing the figure of a lithe young man with pale skin and dark hair standing near an overturned medical monitor.

There was a disoriented, confused expression on his face.

The lid of the sleeping pod was still closed.

However, it was empty.

...And a few hundred meters away, hidden even deeper underground, there was another room.

This one was slightly bigger, and much better guarded, than all the others.

In it stood a simple sleeping pod.

Beneath its transparent lid, a young woman with ivory skin and long silver hair slept, undisturbed by anything.

Despite the growing commotion outside, inside the tranquil room, it was quiet and peaceful.

Nothing changed.

The pod did not shine with bright lights, the medical equipment remained silent.

Imprisoned in the glass coffin of the sleeping pod, the young woman continued to dream, as if cursed to remain in her nightmares forever.

Sunny looked around the small room, slowly realizing where he was.

...Academy. He was back at the Academy.

He had returned to the real world.

He looked around, noticing the medical equipment and the sleeping pod, all of which were currently ablaze with the light of alarms. The pod was still closed.

'How the hell did I get out?'

Speaking of which...

Looking down, Sunny realized that he was naked. To avoid any awkward situations, he summoned the Puppeteer's Shroud.

Once the armor weaved itself out of black strings and covered his skin, he felt a lot better.

...He did, however, have to force himself to not summon the Midnight Shard as well. His instincts screamed, demanding him to arm himself in an unfamiliar environment.

But this was the real world. He had to adjust his behavior.

The decision to cloth himself turned out to be the correct one. Just a few moments after he had made it, the door of the room opened, and a woman in a white coat rushed inside.

Noticing Sunny, she froze. Her eyes widened in horror, and she raised a hand to cover her mouth, as if suppressing a scream.

'What's wrong with her?'

Sunny frowned, blinked a couple of times, then looked at his reflection in one of the medical machines.

'...Oh.'

Since both Sleepers and Awakened traveled to the Dream Realm in spirit, his actual body was whole and pristine, without even a single scar.

However, the same could not be told about the Puppeteer's Shroud.

The silk armor was torn and dirty, looking like rags. What's more, it was covered in so much blood that it was hard to tell that its fabric was once grey.

Looking at the doctor in embarrassment, Sunny forced out a smile and said in a raspy voice of someone who had not spoken in more than that year:

"Uh... hi? Can I maybe get some clean clothes?"

The woman stared at him for a few moments, then said in a trembling voice:

"Slee... Awakened Sunless? Sir, you are awake?"

'Sir... did she just call me sir?'

Sunny grinned.

"I sure hope so. I've been sleeping for a year and two weeks, after all."

The doctor finally seemed to relax and looked at him with a relieved, joyous expression in her eyes.

A few moments later, she smiled slightly and said, her voice full of sincere admiration:

"Welcome back to the real world, sir!"

Chapter 356: Interview with the Shadow

The hospital complex and the administration of the Academy were in complete chaos today. Weeks following the winter solstice were always a busy time for all the people working on the periphery of the Awakened society, since most of the Sleepers who had ventured into the Dream Realm that year usually returned in a span of one to two weeks, very rarely a month.

...Those who had survived, of course.

The sudden Awakening of so many Sleepers who had been gone for years, counted as irrevocably lost, created a shockwave that spread through entire humanity. And people at the Academy were at the epicenter of that storm.

It was a joyous chaos, nevertheless.

In a small office at the surface level of the hospital, a young woman dressed in black slacks and a white blouse was sitting behind a desk, hastily compiling a short report. She had dark-brown hair, neatly tied into a high ponytail, and thick glasses that were constantly sliding down her nose, forcing her to push them back up.

The young woman was one of the administrative workers tasked with the initial debriefing of returning Sleepers. As such, she had seen a lot of incredible things, and heard a lot of incredible stories.

And, sadly, even more heartbreaking ones.

But today was like no other day in her career.

The Sleepers that she was debriefing today were all anomalous, each and every one of them. The things they told her made her blood run cold, and her imagination fail. She even had an urge to dismiss their reports as false, but knew that it was nearly impossible — the lie detection technology built into the walls of the office would make lying very hard to pull off.

'Incredible... they are incredible, every single one of them...'

To survive for that long in a region of the Dream Realm completely cut off from the rest of the human territory, one populated by Nightmare Creatures much more powerful than any Dreamer could ever become... the achievement of these brave young men and women was truly remarkable.

It filled her with a sense of compassion, pride, and hope.

Humanity received an unexpected, but wonderful gift today.

Finishing the report and sending it to her superior, the young woman pressed a button to let the next Sleeper know that it was their turn to come in.

The door of her office opened, and a pale young man with dark hair entered the office.

Because of the nature of her job, she was accustomed to interacting with incredibly attractive people — almost every Awakened was pleasant to look at, after all. The young man in front of her was far from being the most outstanding in terms of appearance among them, and yet, for some reason, she was unable to look away for a couple of moments, a natural smile somehow finding its way onto her face.

There was something elusive about the young man that attracted attention, almost demanded it.

He was of small height, with a delicate, slender build and perfect white skin. His dark eyes had a humorous, slightly mischievous spark in them. The young man wasn't exactly handsome, but due to his small stature, pale complexion, and dark hair, he looked like a beautiful porcelain doll.

And there was a... a subtle strangeness about him. The young woman couldn't quite put it into words, but it seemed as though his every move, every word was ever so slightly not exactly how they should have been. Not really wrong, but also not completely right.

This quality was equally as disturbing as it was magnetic. It was the reason why she couldn't stop paying him a bit more attention than to all the other Sleepers she had interviewed today.

The young man smiled and sat down opposite her. In response, her own smile widened a little.

"Good day. My name is Teddy, and I will be your interviewer today, Awakened... uh..."

Of course, she already knew his name. His file was opened on the screen in front of her, containing all the information the Academy had on the pleasant young man. But it was important to create a friendly environment to allow the Sleepers to relax. After their experiences in the Dream Realm, most were tense and on edge.

'Second to last place in the ranking... poor kid, I can't even imagine what horrors he had to survive...'

The young man answered in a pleasant tone:

"Sunless. But people usually call me Sunny. So, uh... Awakened Sunny, I guess? No, that sounds weird. Just call me Sunny."

Teddy nodded, then typed a few words on her pad.

"I will ask you a series of questions about your time in the Dream Realm. The purpose of this briefing is to enrich our base of knowledge about it, as well as let us know how to better assist you in the future. Any little bit of information you can provide might help future Dreamers in their own trials, but you don't have to answer if you don't want to, of course."

Awakened Sunless... Sunny... nodded seriously.

"I understand. I promise to be honest and tell you only the truth. I am a very honest person, you see."

Teddy smiled and asked the first question:

"How long have you spent in the Dream Realm?"

Sunny sighed.

"A year and a few weeks. Although, uh... it felt much longer."

That matched the information in the file.

'This is so terrible. A whole year out there...'

She smiled with encouragement.

"I see. You did very well, Sunny. Very few Dreamers had managed to survive for that long, especially in a region such as the... the Forgotten Shore, right?"

He shivered slightly before answering:

"Yeah. That's what we called it."

Teddy typed a few more words.

"From the interviews with the other Dreamers, we have confirmed that the region of the Dream Realm you were sent to is populated with Nightmare Creatures of the Awakened Rank and above. Can you confirm that information?"

The young man grew a little paler and nodded again.

"Yeah. Awakened, Fallen... Corrupted, too, although those only appeared at night."

Teddy added a couple of lines to her report and asked:

"Have you participated in the battles against such Nightmare Creatures? If so, how many have you killed?"

Sunny was silent for a second, then raised his hand and began counting on his fingers with a thoughtful expression.

"Uh, three or four..."

She began to type and thought:

"Four Awakened creatures. That poor kid looks so weak, and yet he managed to defeat four abominations much more powerful than him, despite being in second to last place of the ranking. Good job, Sunny. You are truly admirable."

But Sunny didn't finish speaking.

"...hundreds."

Teddy froze, staring at the monitor.

"Excuse me?"

The young man thoughtfully scratched his chin and said:

"Yeah, I think that's right. Around four hundred."

After a long and awkward silence, he asked:

"I am sorry, Teddy, is everything alright?"

She nodded slowly, then forced out a smile.

"...Everything is fine, Sunny. I... I am sorry. We'll have to pause the interview now."

He looked at her with sincere surprise and blinked a couple of times.

"Really? Why?"

She cleared her throat, then answered in a small voice:

"I'm... afraid that I am not qualified to conduct this interview. My... my superior will be with you shortly, Sun... Awakened Sunless. Please wait for a few minutes."

Sunny sighed.

"Oh, well. Alright. It's been nice to meet you."

With that, he gave her a bright smile.

Chapter 357: Risk and Reward

Sunny left the office of the government agents in a strange mood.

The conversation went exactly as he had planned. Even after a higher-ranking specialist had been called in, he managed to steer the interview in the right direction, manipulating both answers and questions to achieve the desired result. In the end, he wanted everyone to know that he was someone exceptional... but not so exceptional as to overshadow the best of the best.

Someone who was in the very highest tier of young Awakened, but also at the very bottom of that tier.

Even though he had kept his most outrageous accomplishments to himself, it felt weird to give away so many secrets about his skill, power level, and achievements. Sunny had grown so used to pretending to be a pathetic clown that removing that mask to reveal another, less outlandish mask was not easy for him.

And yet, it was something he had to do.

After he had Awakened, there was not a single moment for him to properly think things through. He had to go through a series of medical and psychological tests, followed by a lengthy debriefing. However, he had been able to realize one thing very clearly.

His situation had fundamentally changed.

Now that his most important secret was revealed and Nephis had become his master, it was as though a crushing burden had been removed from his chest.

...Replaced by another, even more terrible weight.

In any case, he could finally allow himself to relax a little... for a while, at least. Not because he trusted her that much, but because she was currently

imprisoned in the Dream Realm, unable to enforce her control over him even if she wished to.

In a sense, as far as his worst nightmare becoming reality went, this was the absolute best version of how things could happen.

He had a lot of time to think about countermeasures and prepare for whatever the future held, after all.

Walking through the corridors of the hospital complex, Sunny was engrossed in thought.

One thing he was sure about was that a divine shadow like him could only have one master. So, he didn't have to worry about someone else finding out his True Name and enslaving him, not anymore. The guillotine blade that had hung above his neck all that time was now gone.

However, he still kept the existence of his True Name a secret, for one simple reason — he didn't know what was going to happen if Nephis died.

Would he be free forever? Or die with her?

He felt that neither of these theories was correct. Firstly because the description of the Aspect described him as a divine shadow that had lost its master... which probably meant that he could lose another one and remain alive. Secondly, because the runes of the Shadow Bond had become grey and lifeless, but did not disappear.

Which meant that they might shine with ethereal light once again in the future.

So, the most probable explanation was that he would be safe as long as Nephis remained alive, and if she was killed, anyone would be able to use the True Name against him once again.

A deep scowl appeared on his face.

How long could anyone survive in the decimated remains of the Forgotten Shore? The dark sea was gone, but so was the sun. Most of the Nightmare

Creatures were dead, but the strongest ones survived. It seemed that Changing Star had escaped the collapsing Crimson Spire, at least. What was she going to do now?

Try to cross the Hollow Mountains to reach the human Citadels, or try her luck in the unexplored regions to the north, west, or east? What were the chances of her making it back to the real world alive?

If it was anyone else, Sunny would say that the probability was zero. But it was Nephis, after all. For some reason, he was sure that she would survive, somehow.

So, yes. Even though many things remained unclear, his situation had fundamentally changed.

He was an Awakened now, which meant that there were countless possibilities in front of him. To get access to the best opportunities and the most advantageous treatment, he needed one thing: status.

At this point, continuing to pretend to be a weakling would only be a hindrance. Sunny wanted to reap as many rewards as he could without putting himself at risk. That's why he shifted his usual pattern of behavior and gave the government agents enough information to paint himself as an exceptionally talented Awakened.

Not that he had a lot of choices. Sooner or later, people were going to learn at least some things about his time on the Forgotten Shore and see that a weakling simply would not have survived all that.

Luckily, there was no shortage of exceptionally talented individuals who had Awakened today. On any other day, Sunny's description of his prowess would have made a huge splash. But currently, he was just one of a hundred.

Speaking of that hundred...

Turning a corner, Sunny suddenly found himself in the middle of a small crowd of people. Dozens and dozens of young men and women were

standing in the middle of a small hall, most dressed in the simple training clothes provided by the hospital, just like he himself was. On their faces, there was an indescribable kaleidoscope of emotions: joy, sorrow, worry, anticipation...

Most were looking at a small screen displaying a long list of names.

These were the survivors of the Dreamer Army.

Not everyone was here, of course. Some spent many years on the Forgotten Shore and had been transferred to other facilities by the government or their families. Sunny didn't see Seishan, Kai, or Effie.

...Or Cassie.

His face darkened.

The absence of the first two made sense. Kai was probably being cared for in an expensive VIP care facility, while Seishan had to be kept in the stronghold of her clan. However, he had no idea where the other two were.

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then looked at the list of names displayed on the screen.

Before he could read anything, however, someone quickly approached... and hugged him tightly.

'What the...'

Looking up, Sunny saw a vaguely familiar young man holding him in a passionate embrace. A moment later, the young man let go of him and looked down with glistening eyes:

"Sunny! You are here, too!"

Before he could even answer, a somber expression appeared on the young man's face. In a voice that trembled with emotion, he said:

"Thank you! Thank you so much, Sunny. If it wasn't for you and your shadow, we would have never made it to the Gateway."

At the sound of these words, the others turned around. As soon as they saw Sunny, bright smiles ignited on their faces. A hum of voices rose from the crowd:

"Guys! It's Sunny!"

"Thank you, man!"

"We will never forget what you did for us!"

Sunny stared at them, dumbfounded.

'Weird... this is so weird...'

Ever since he had come to his senses near the sleeping pod, mundane humans were treating him with the utmost respect. They even went so far as to use honorifics, calling him "sir" or "Awakened Sunless".

And now this... why was everyone so friendly and happy to see him? He had never experienced anything like this before.

Was this what it was like, to be an Awakened?

After dozens of young people came closer to shake his hand or happily pat him on the shoulder, he awkwardly smiled.

"Uh... it's nice to see you too, guys."

The young woman who was currently facing him smiled in response. Then, however, her face turned dark.

"Have you heard anything about Lady Nephis after coming back?"

He stiffened, then shook his head.

"No. Have... have you?"

She turned back to the screen, tears appearing in her eyes.

"Nothing. None of us did. Out of everyone who made it to the Spire, only two are unaccounted for. She... we think she is still inside."

Sunny remained silent for a while, then asked:

"Who is the second?"

The young woman sighed.

"Sir Caster. No one had seen him near the Gateway. He must have gone to help her hold back the Terror, and... and..."

Her voice trembled.

"...someone said that he died. Oh, gods! What if Lady Nephis dies, too?"

Sunny lingered for a few seconds, a grim expression on his face, then squeezed her shoulder lightly and quietly walked away.

Chapter 358: Shadow Step | Shadow Slave

The hospital staff had provided each of the newly Awakened with a small room at one of the underground levels of the complex, to have a place to rest and get accustomed to their new abilities while waiting for more permanent accommodations — if they were going to remain at the Academy, of course.

It was also a place they could take their families to talk and spend time together in privacy. Currently, many emotional reunions were taking place in similar rooms around Sunny's, made especially joyous and heartbreaking because the survivors of the Dreamer Army had spent long years on the Forgotten Shore.

They had gone through hell, indeed, but their loved ones in the real world had suffered a great deal as well.

...Not that Sunny would know anything about that. No one had been waiting for him to return, after all.

In any case, the room he had been provided with was sufficiently comfortable. There was an area for training, a desk with a pitcher of water and some snacks, a sofa, and even a bed.

None of the returned were going to sleep, of course. Not for a few days, at least.

At the very end of the field of shimmering runes, Sunny could now see a new string of symbols:

Gateway: —

Usually, the name of the Gateway that an Awakened had last used would be written there. This was their anchor in the Dream Realm.

Every time an Awakened fell asleep, they would be transported to the Gateway they were anchored to, spend some time in the Dream Realm —

either as much as they wanted or as little as possible, only until their soul was ready to travel between worlds once again — and then go through that Gateway to wake up back in reality.

However, the Gateway of the Forgotten Shore had been destroyed. For that reason, every single survivor of the Dreamer Army now had no anchor in the Dream Realm. That didn't mean that they would remain in the waking world forever, though.

Rather, it meant that they were going to be transported to a random one as soon as they fell asleep, just like during their first journey into the land of nightmares. The prospect of being at the mercy of the Spell once more was nothing short of terrifying.

Especially for Sunny, who had the misfortune of always finding himself in only the most extreme of circumstances.

However, the situation wasn't really that bad.

There was a way for a newly Awakened to change their anchor without relying on chance. It was to acquire the services of a Saint, who would be able to take them to the Dream Realm without involving the Spell, appearing near the Saint's own anchor.

Of course, that anchor would most likely be situated in one of the human Citadels, allowing the Awakened to anchor themselves to a Gateway in human territory.

There were just a few dozen Saints alive across all of humanity, so for an average Awakened, their help was not easy to get.

However, Sunny was not an average Awakened. In fact, none of the survivors of the Dreamer Army were.

Every year, the most promising of the newly Awakened were recruited by powerful Citadels and provided the means to anchor themselves to their Gateways. Everyone profited from this arrangement — the talented Awakened received a chance to change their anchor if they wished to do so,

while Citadels received new powerful defenders or useful craftsmen to enhance their living conditions and infrastructure.

With how extraordinary the hundred survivors of the Forgotten Shore were, and how unusual their circumstances turned out to be, there was going to be a small recruitment war happening in the next few days. Prosperous Citadels were going to fight for the right to add these outstanding young people to their populations, promising better and bigger rewards, as if during an auction.

The government would inevitably get involved, too, helping those who for some reason failed to find a Citadel to call home.

The survivors of the Dreamer Army just had to remain awake long enough to make a choice and settle the details of their future anchors. Since their physique was far superior to that of mundane humans, they didn't have to sleep every day, so two or three were not going to be a problem.

...Sunny had a lot to do in these few days.

The first thing he had turned his attention to after retreating to his personal room was test the limits of Shadow Step.

The result of these tests left him pleasantly surprised.

Just like he had suspected, the ability to travel between shadows was akin to a weird form of teleportation. He could enter a shadow that was large enough to encompass his body and instantly appear from another.

The distance of that jump, however, was not too large. Currently, it was even smaller than the range of his Shadow Sense, around a dozen meters or so. However, he knew that it would increase as he absorbed more shadow fragments, just like the range of Shadow Control had increased back on the Forgotten Shore.

There was an exclusion from that rule, too.

He was able to travel between his own shadows no matter how far apart they were.

By now, he could control his shadows from as much as a couple of kilometers away. That meant that, if both were sent into opposite directions and reached the limit of the Shadow Control range, he could potentially instantly cover about four kilometers of distance in less than a second.

And that was just one side of Shadow Step. The other was, arguably, even more miraculous and unexpected.

Before, Sunny could move through shadows as though he was one of them, becoming practically undetectable.

But now, he could literally become a part of the shadows, diving into them and becoming incorporeal. Not only did it make him completely undetectable by means of sight, hearing, and smell, but it also allowed him to move with incredible speed through any uninterrupted shadow, no matter how long and vast it was.

In that state, he was invulnerable to physical attacks, but also unable to perform physical attacks of his own.

It also felt very strange. Sort of... peaceful. Sunny had to constantly remind himself to concentrate and not forget what he was doing.

That ability would become truly incredible at night or in the depths of some terrible cave system, like the one they had traveled through on their expedition to the Hollow Mountains.

In short, Shadow Step was incredible.

However, it came at a price.

Unlike Shadow Control, which was as natural to Sunny as breathing, using Shadow Step required him to expend essence. The more distance he covered with a jump and the more time he spent as an incorporeal shadow, the more essence he would have to consume.

Sunny suspected that the theoretical four-kilometer jump would eat through all of his essence, leaving both of his cores dry as a desert.

Spending essence was not the same as spending shadow fragments, of course. His soul always slowly generated essence, eventually filling his cores to their maximum capacity, while shadow fragments increased that maximum capacity and were used to create new cores, as well as turn Echoes into Shadows.

Still, he also needed essence to fight effectively and use the more powerful enchantments of higher rank Memories, so balancing its expenditure was an intricate task.

Truly, becoming an Awakened had opened a whole new layer of both incredible opportunities and insidious problems. It was a lot to take in.

...But he was going to get there, eventually.

Sitting on the floor of his temporary quarters, Sunny sighed and summoned the runes.

Finally, it was time to reap his reward.

He had worked so much, and done so much, to get here. First, repeating the same sword strike thousands of times, day after day, until his hands bled and his muscles screamed from the pain. Learning the basic katas and movements of Neph's flowing battle style, then gaining enough insight into it to make it his own. Almost dying to receive the gift of clarity, then fighting against the Shadow Saint and slowly incorporating her grounded technique into his.

Studying the movements of his shadow to catch the slight difference in how it held itself, then spending countless hours trying to decipher the hidden meaning behind it, until his mind was ready to boil. Solving that mystery and traveling into the past to observe the birth of the nameless temple slave, and the beautiful dance of his mother.

And then, torturous practice and arduous process of turning his vision of the elusive and wonderful battle art into reality.

Only to finally succeed in the middle of the furious, bloody battle against Nephis.

Of all his achievements, this was perhaps the one he was proud of the most.

Because Shadow Dance was entirely his. It was something he created out of almost nothing, something that bore and expressed his individuality.

Sunny had never received any type of inheritance, so this legacy, which was created by himself and for himself, held a special place in his heart.

...Looking at the shimmering runes, he read:

Aspect Legacy: [Shadow Dance].

Shadow Dance Mastery Level: [1/7].

First Relic: [Claim].

Second Relic: Unearned.

Third Relic: Unearned...

Holding his breath, he concentrated on the runes describing the first relic and whispered:

"Claim."

As Sunny watched, the runes glowed brightly for a few seconds, and then changed.

First Relic: Claimed.

And a moment later, the Spell spoke softly into his ear:

[You have received an Aspect Legacy Relic.]

[You have received a Shadow: Soul Serpent.]

Chapter 359: Soul Serpent | Shadow Slave

Sunny stared at the runes for a while, then slightly tilted his head.

'A Shadow...'

What an unexpected boon.

Usually, a Legacy Relic came in the form of a Memory, or very rarely an Echo. Perhaps there were some other types of Relics out there, but he had never heard of them.

That didn't mean much, though. By now, Sunny was reasonably certain that there were a lot of things that he, as well as the rest of mundane humans, had never heard about. Awakened kept a lot of secrets.

Nevertheless, receiving a Shadow pleasantly surprised him.

Looking up, he saw new runes appearing out of thin air:

Shadows: [Marble Saint], [Soul Serpent].

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then furtively looked around. The small room was empty and quiet.

Feeling a little bit stupid, Sunny shook his head and summoned his new Shadow to take a good look at it.

A slight breeze moved his hair, and in the next second...

Nothing happened.

'Huh?'

Sunny frowned and looked around the room, then scratched the back of his head.

'What the hell? Where is the damn snake?'

He had hoped to see a giant serpent made out of shadows appear in front of him, with black scales as thick as plate armor and a mouth wide enough to swallow his enemies whole. Or an average-sized snake, at least!

But there was nothing.

He even checked to see if a new shadow joined his two invaluable helpers, but no. Both rested on the floor, one seemingly content, the other bored and in a perpetually bad mood.

'Weird...'

He raised a hand to rub his eyes, but froze at the last moment.

"What is that?"

There was something dark on the skin of his wrist, peaking out slightly from beneath the sleeve.

Following intuition, Sunny hastily stood up and took off the top of the training suit provided to him by the staff of the hospital complex. Left naked to the waist, he then looked at himself through the eyes of the shadow.

'...Huh?!'

Out there on his pale skin, an intricate image of a black serpent was tattooed, so detailed that it almost seemed alive. The serpent coiled around his arms and his torso, its tail resting just above his right hand, its head just above his left.

"...What? I have... a tattoo now?"

In the darkness of the small room, the serpent almost seemed to move under his skin, two curved fangs threatening to break its surface. It was striking, beautiful, and disturbing.

Of course, Sunny recognized the serpent immediately. Both the nameless temple slave and his mother had a very similar image marking their skin, after all.

It was the Shadow God's mark.

But why did his new Shadow turn into a tattoo?

Confused, Sunny listened to his body and soul, trying to feel if something had changed about them.

And soon, he did notice a small difference.

The flow of the shadow essence through his body had changed. If previously it had circulated naturally, now, it seemed to follow the coils of the serpent, moving faster and with more intent, as if directed by them.

'Soul Serpent... does that thing enhance my shadow essence control?'

To experiment, Sunny poured essence into his limbs and then performed several movements of Shadow Dance. After that, he jumped from one shadow to another a few times, expending even more essence.

He felt the difference instantly. Not only was he able to control the essence better, but it also seemed to be consumed at a slightly slower pace, and restore at a faster one.

Soul Serpent served as a channel for it, existing both on the material and the spiritual plane. As such, it was connected both to his cores and to his body, creating a strange bridge that allowed Sunny to use his shadow essence with better efficiency.

'This is... a very useful Shadow.'

Those words were an egregious understatement. Sunny had already understood how important and vital managing essence was for the Awakened — any tool that could enhance that aspect of their power was truly precious.

And he got such a marvelous one, practically for free.

He was also sure that the Serpent would only get more powerful in the future, provided he kept it well-fed, of course.

...But how was he supposed to feed Memories to a tattoo?

Perplexed, Sunny thought for a bit, then finally concentrated on the runes once again.

Shadow: [Soul Serpent].

Shadow Rank: Dormant.

Shadow Class: Monster.

Shadow Attributes: [Shadow Guide], [Soul Weapon].

Shadow Description: [When the end came, Shadow was the last of the gods to be destroyed. Many have resented him for creating death, but in the end, death embraced all.]

Noting the interesting detail of a connection between Shadow God and death, Sunny lowered his gaze.

However, the last string, the one he had been accustomed to paying the most attention to when it came to Saint, was missing. There was no indication of how many shadow fragments it would take to make the Serpent evolve.

Sunny frowned.

Come to think of it...

That strange Shadow was clearly connected to his soul. Perhaps it wasn't a coincidence that it was a monster — Sunny was a monster himself, after all. So, maybe, the Serpent would not evolve its Class like Saint had, by consuming the soul core of a suitable Nightmare Creature. Most likely, it would grow alongside Sunny himself.

But why was it of the Dormant Rank, while Sunny had already become an Awakened?

'Huh...'

Maybe... maybe its Rank was not tied to Sunny's soul, but to his comprehension of the Shadow Dance? Currently, he had mastered only the first of the seven steps of the battle art, and the Serpent belonged to the first of the seven Ranks. Would it evolve to a higher Rank if he mastered more steps?

Full of thoughts, Sunny sighed and turned his attention to the Shadow's Attributes.

[Shadow Guide] Attribute Description: "Soul Serpent guides shadow essence as it flows through your body."

[Soul Weapon] Attribute Description: "Soul Serpent can assume the form of a weapon."

'The form of a wea... wait, what?'

Sunny blinked a couple of times, then stared at his left wrist, where the head of the Soul Serpent was drawn under his skin. Its scales were so intricate that it almost seemed as if the creature was moving.

Now... it really was moving.

Following Sunny's mental command, the Soul Serpent slithered up to his hand, and then escaped from it, turning into a dark blade. As the coils moved across his body, the blade grew longer and longer, until a hilt wrapped in black leather rested comfortably in his grip.

The tattoo was gone.

Sunny found himself holding a lusterless greatsword. It was a menacing, formidable, foreboding odachi.

Including the hilt, the odachi was as long as he was tall. It was surprisingly light for its length, but heavy enough to inflict truly devastating wounds.

Almost invisible on the dark steel, an lifelike image of a coiling serpent was etched into its blade.

He weighed the greatsword in his hands for a while, then smiled darkly.

'...Truly, this is a weapon worthy of a shadow.'

It was still weak, though. If it was a Memory, it would have been only a Dormant one of the second tier. Sunny was going to have to put in some work to make the dark odachi really fearsome.

With a sigh, he commanded the Serpent to slither back onto his body, and then to disappear entirely. A few seconds later, his skin was clean and empty once again.

'What a bountiful harvest I had today.'

Sunny stared at the darkness for a few minutes, then sighed heavily.

It was time to do something that he had dreaded doing ever since returning to the real world.

He couldn't put it off any longer.

Chapter 360: Broken | Shadow Slave

In a heavily guarded underground room, a young woman with silver hair was sleeping in a transparent machine that kept her body alive. Her face was pale and thin, painted by the ghostly glow of machine lights and deep, angular shadows.

The room was peaceful and silent, the hum of machinery creating low background noise. From time to time, a piece of medical equipment produced a sound and grew quiet again.

A blind girl with piercing blue eyes stood quietly near the sleeping pod, an empty expression written in the delicate lines of her beautiful face. If it wasn't for the fact that her hand rested on the hilt of an elegant rapier, a person would easily mistake her for one of the Hollows that were cared for on another level of the hospital complex.

The door of the room did not open, however, there was suddenly another presence inside. A young man with pale skin and dark, cruel eyes appeared out of the shadows and walked over to stand on the opposite side of the sleeping pod. His steps were soft and quiet.

He lingered for a while, then looked down, at the young woman sleeping beneath the glass lid of the mechanical coffin.

For a second, his face became contorted by a terrible grimace. Grief, anger, fear, and longing mixed in his eyes, then disappeared, hidden behind a mask of cold indifference.

Sunny stared at Nephis for a long time, trying to get his emotions under control. He knew that seeing her like this, weak and helpless, would affect him. But he didn't know just how much it was going to hurt him.

...He also had not anticipated how dark the thoughts entering his mind would be.

'...I can kill her right now. One strike of the Moonlight Shard, and I'll be free again.'

But no, he couldn't.

Firstly, because there was no guarantee that Nephis would die if her body was destroyed. Just like there were Hollows, people whose souls had been destroyed while leaving an empty body behind, there were Lost — people whose bodies in the real world had died, leaving their souls wandering the Dream Realm.

He suspected that this was the reason why the people who wanted Changing Star dead had sent Caster to kill her in the Dream Realm instead of infiltrating the Academy.

And secondly, and maybe more importantly... he simply could not bring himself to harm Nephis. Not again, not anymore, and not... not like this.

'Cassie, on the other hand...'

With a dark grimace, Sunny slowly moved his gaze to the blind girl.

As if noticing it, she turned slightly and said:

"Hello, Sunny."

He stared at her, his eyes burning with fury.

"What, you can see now?"

Cassie lingered for a moment, then shook her head.

"No. But... something like that."

A wild grin appeared on his face.

"Congratulations. Really, good for you! You won't be useless anymore, at least."

He knew that his words were going to hurt her, and was glad to say them for that reason

The blind girl didn't react, and just continued staring into the emptiness, her eyes cold and distant. But he wasn't fooled. He knew her well enough to recognize the ocean of pain hiding behind that coldness.

'Good... suffer! You deserve this!'

Sunny opened his mouth, wishing to accuse her, but then forced himself to stop. He had to keep himself under control...

Swallowing his angry words, Sunny gritted his teeth and spat:

"How? How did you even know?!"

Cassie hesitated for a bit, then answered quietly:

"When you killed that spy from the Castle. You said it out loud then. I saw it... in a vision. After that, the rest was not impossible to figure out."

His eyes widened.

Sunny remained silent for a long time, trying to deal with the shock that her words had caused him.

'Harper... when I killed Harper?'

The memory of that horrible day sent a shudder through his soul. He remembered it so vividly... the blood streaming down his hands as he held the pitiful young man down, murdering him, giving in to the agony of the Flaw.

And whispering in a hoarse, barely audible voice:

"Lost from Light! I am... Lost... Lost from Light..."

Standing in the underground room of the hospital complex, Sunny wanted to both laugh and cry.

'So this is it... this was what did me in... one mistake, I only made one mistake, and it was all it took to undo me!'

It was almost as if Harper had managed to avenge himself from beyond the grave. Well... he had never gotten a grave, really. Sunny just dumped his body in the ruins, for the Nightmare Creatures to feast on.

A lot of good it did him, in the end.

Piercing the blind girl with a burning look, he said through gritted teeth:

"So that was why you were waiting for me back then, why you gave me the Eternal Spring? You were... you were ready to say goodbye. You knew?"

Cassie slowly faced him, then said in a steady, even tone:

"Yes. I did."

Sunny looked down, clenching his fists.

"You knew... if you knew... then why didn't you try to change anything?! Why, curse you?!"

Cassie stared at him, her calm expression finally collapsing. Pain, sorrow, and anger contorted her face, and with a voice so hurt that it almost sounded as if she was bleeding, she answered:

"Didn't try?! Of course, I tried! I tried everything I could to make the future I saw change! But no matter how much I tried, it never did. It always remained the same! Even worse, my attempts only made it... appear even more inevitable..."

Turning away, she gritted her teeth and remained silent for a while, her hands trembling.

"I... I... I was the first one to understand what my vision of the Crimson Spire meant. Shadows devouring a dying angel... I understood it on that very day."

Cassie closed her eyes for a moment, then spoke again, her voice quiet.

"Don't you remember? I even asked you to promise to always protect her. And what did you say?"

Sunny stared at her, remembering. Yes, at the very start, there had been a conversation like that.

"...No. I said no."

A fragile smile appeared on Cassie's face.

"Yes. You said no. And on that day, I knew that I had to make a choice. And I made it. I chose Neph."

She shivered and hugged herself, as if dying of cold.

"I had to betray one of my best friends to save the other. And I did. I chose to sacrifice you to save Neph. Of course, I fooled myself for a while, telling myself that nothing bad would happen. That if I help Neph, maybe both of you would survive. But deep down, I knew that it was just one of the possible outcomes, so what was the difference? I betrayed you. And you know what?"

A small, bitter laugh escaped from her lips.

"It was for nothing. I betrayed my best friend, and nothing still changed. I sacrificed you, but couldn't save anyone. Despite it all, I couldn't... couldn't change fate."

Sunny stared at her for a while, then snarled:

"...That's it? That's your speech? That's what you have to say for yourself? What do you want me to do, pity you?"

A furious gleam appeared in his eyes.

"After everything I have done for you, after I saved your life countless times, took care of you as if you were my sister, this is how you chose to

repay me? By giving my biggest secret to Neph, so that she could use it against me when the time came?"

Cassie remained silent, not saying anything.

"Do you even know what you've done?! Do you even know what you've taken from me?!"

She hesitated for a bit, that answered quietly:

"I didn't know why, or how my vision would come true. I only knew that it would happen in the Spire. So I gave your secret to Nephis, hoping that she would survive thanks to it."

Sunny laughed, then grew quiet.

An oppressive silence settled between them, and remained unbroken for several minutes.

After a while, he finally said:

"...I can understand. Rationally, I do. You were forced to make a terrible decision, with both choices being a betrayal. And you chose to help Neph, who was with you first. Who saved you when I would have just left you to die."

But then, a cold gleam appeared in his eyes.

"But that doesn't mean that I can forgive it. You go to hell, Cassie. Go to hell and die there, for all I care. I hope that I will never see you again."

With that, Sunny turned around to leave, but then stopped.

He couldn't help but be cruel to her one last time.

"Oh, and that secret? It was the reason why she got stuck there all alone. So, in a sense, you have doomed both of your friends."

As he spoke those words, Cassie flinched.

A satisfied, vindictive smile appeared on Sunny's face.

...But why did it hurt him so much to say those words?

"So, congratulations. You've made it back, Cassie. Go back home, spend time with your family. Didn't you tell me that your mother makes the best eggs? Eat your fill. Try to enjoy them, knowing what you did."

As the blind girl paled and turned away with a broken expression on his face, he smiled bitterly and dissolved into the shadows.

Bonds of friendship were such a fragile thing.

They were so hard to create, but so easy to break.

All it took was a moment...

Chapter 361: The Goal | Shadow Slave

Sitting with his back against the door of his room, Sunny stared ahead, his heart empty.

He had lived most of his life alone. One year ago, he had entered the Dream Realm alone. And now, he was alone once again.

But not having something was very different from losing it. Now that he knew how precious true friendship and affection were, existing without them felt like torture. It felt like there was a bleeding wound on his soul, left there after he had so cruelly severed the tether connecting him to Cassie.

One of the very few people he cared for in this world...

Hurting her felt good and justified, but instead of relief, it only brought him more pain.

Nevertheless, he did not regret what he had done. Sometimes one had to endure suffering.

Sometimes, pain was necessary.

Now, Sunny was completely alone. So was Cassie.

And somewhere in the Dream Realm, Nephis was alone, too.

The three of them had done the impossible, but paid a heavy price for it.

'What a fiasco.'

Who would have thought that one day, he would not only escape the Forgotten Shore, but also become vastly more powerful than he had ever dreamed... only to sit on the floor in a dark room, feeling miserable?

With a resentful grimace, Sunny shook his head and sighed.

'Enough of wallowing in self-pity.'

He had a lot of things to do. A lot of plans to make. The horrors of the Forgotten Shore were now behind him, but new threats already loomed in the distance.

Firstly, he was now at the mercy of another person. Despite the fact that his master was lost in another world with very low chances of ever making it back, Sunny felt that they were fated to meet again.

He didn't know how to feel about that. Or rather, he both desperately longed for Nephis to return and wished that she died. His emotions for her were intense, overwhelming, and an absolute mess.

Despite all that, Sunny didn't think that she would die.

Somehow, he was sure that Nephis would not perish in the Dream Realm and eventually make it back. Maybe in a few months, maybe in a few years, but she would achieve the impossible once again and return to the real world.

The question was... how? Would she travel to the human territory through the Hollow Mountains, or head in another direction? They didn't know much about what surrounded the Forgotten Shore from the east, west, and north. He doubted that those places were better than the horrifying, misty mountains, though.

That doubt was based on one simple fact: there was no information about them, which meant that no human had ever returned from those regions of the Dream Realm to tell the tale.

Although deadly, Hollow Mountains were at least known to mankind. Chances were, Changing Star would choose to try her luck there instead of venturing into the unknown.

Nothing was more dangerous than that you knew nothing about, after all.

'Unknown...'

Sunny frowned.

That was another problem he had to face... or rather, an opportunity he would potentially be able to exploit. Due to his [Fated] Attribute, Sunny had stumbled onto the legacy of a creature named Weaver and got a glimpse into the secrets of the gods.

What he saw there left him both terrified and breathless.

There was a boundless mystery hiding in the ruined land of dreams and nightmares, a tapestry that connected the dead gods, the Unknown, the daemons, and the Nightmare Spell together. The former rulers of the Dream Realm were gone, but the Spell remained, and humanity — including Sunny himself — had now become an unwilling part of that tapestry through it.

Sunny's most ardent desire was to control his own fate, and he couldn't achieve it without knowledge. Now that he knew what to look for, he had to deepen his understanding of the fate of the gods and the origins of the Spell. Who knew, maybe that was where the keys to his freedom were hidden.

...And then, there were the Sovereigns.

His face grew dark.

'Honestly, why is everything so complicated...'

Why couldn't he just open a Memory Store, become wealthy and fat, and leave peacefully ever after?

That was his plan all along. However, the recent revelations made Sunny doubt the validity of such plans.

Judging from what Caster had said, there were some figures hiding in the shadows, ruling over the human world. And not only were they there, but Sunny was also, apparently, unwillingly doing their bidding.

He still remembered the warning Nephis had given him once. She told them that there were words that could get him killed simply if he learned of their

existence.

Well... now he knew a lot of those words.

Sovereigns, Domains, Lineage Memories...

Was he going to pretend to know nothing and hope that those powerful beings would not turn their gaze to him one day, or was he going to do something to prepare for the day they do?

Did he even have a choice, knowing what he did, with his fate hopelessly entangled with that of Changing Star... who was embroiled in these clandestine machinations just by virtue of her birth?

'So bothersome...'

What was he supposed to do? What was the plan of action?

Sunny sighed.

Well, it was simple, really.

Learn as much as he can about the Sovereigns, but in a way that would never lead back to him.

Explore the past of the Dream Realm to gain insight into the daemons, the gods, and the Unknown.

But first and foremost, grow stronger.

Much, much stronger.

When Nephis returned, he had to be ready for the worst. Sunny didn't really think that Changing Star he knew would abuse her power over him... in fact, he was almost sure that she wouldn't. Not only because of the bond between them, but also because in Neph's warped mind, doing so would simply be beneath her.

However, he wasn't going to let this sweet hope prevent him from creating contingencies.

If she ever decided to truly make him a slave, one of them was going to die.

Standing up, Sunny walked over to the desk and wrote on a piece of synthetic paper:

[0/2000].

Then, he summoned the runes, glanced at them, and added a second string of numbers:

[2749/3000].

However, the runes shimmered and changed before he was done writing. The number of soul essence grew bigger.

Sunny stared at the runes for a few seconds, then corrected the number.

Then, he put the pen down and looked at the piece of paper in front of him:

[0/2000] < [2773/3000].

"Alright."

So, this was it.

This was the plan.

From now on, this was his life's goal.

Chapter 362: Breakfast Invitation | Shadow Slave

The initial series of tests, the interview with the government specialists, the somber conversation with Cassie, and the hours Sunny had spent pondering about his past, present, and future took up almost an entire day. A new dawn was already bathing the world in soft sunlight, which Sunny knew because one of the walls in his underground room was made into a false window, with a vista of one of the parks in the Academy being projected onto it from a remote camera.

He was experiencing mild mental fatigue, but was not sleepy at all, at least not yet. Truly, the physique of an Awakened was much more resilient than that of a mundane human.

There were still a few things he had to do. In all the turmoil of the past twenty-four hours, he had not gotten a chance to take a proper look at his Memories, for example...

Sunny was about to summon the runes when, suddenly, there was a knock on his door. He flinched.

'...What? Who can it be?'

For a moment, a mental picture of Effie and Kai appeared in his mind, but then he dismissed it. The two of them must have been as busy after their Awakening as he was. Much more, most likely, considering that they probably had friends and families to deal with, too, on top of everything else. With them being in different facilities, coming to the Academy just to pay him a visit was not a likely scenario.

Certainly not that soon.

Hiding one of the shadows on his body to appear like a normal person, Sunny walked to the door and opened it.

Standing there was a striking, confident woman in her late twenties.

Immediately, it seemed as though the temperature inside of the room dropped by a couple of degrees.

She had short, raven-black hair and icy blue eyes. Her flawless skin was smooth, supple and as white as snow. The woman was dressed in a dark blue uniform with silver epaulets and black leather boots. The jacket of the uniform was casually unbuttoned, revealing a tanktop that was currently drawn taut against her full...

'Crap!'

"...What are you staring at, Awakened Sunless?"

Sunny looked up with wide eyes.

"Master Jet! I was just... uh... appreciating your fashion sense."

Indeed, it was Soul Reaper Jet — the Ascended who worked for the government and had welcomed him back to the real world after the First Nightmare.

Sunny had sometimes thought about this beautiful woman during his journey into the Dream Realm. Not only because the three pieces of advice Master Jet had given him ended up saving his life on multiple occasions, but also because she was from the outskirts, just like him.

Knowing that someone as unfortunate as that had managed to not only survive, but even thrive in the ruthless reality of the Nightmare Spell had given fuel to his determination, as well as providing vital perspective.

...But what was she doing at his door?

Sunny studied Master Jet, suddenly full of doubt.

She looked exactly as she had a year ago, the only difference being that her uniform had more wrinkles, and there were now dark circles under her eyes.

As he watched, she grinned.

"My fashion sense? Why, thank you! If you want, I can introduce you to my tailors. You will have to sign a few thick contracts to receive a comfy suit such as this, though."

Sunny forced out a smile.

"Ah, I see. Those tailors are slightly out of my price range, I'm afraid. But thanks for the offer."

After a short pause, he cautiously asked:

"Uhm, Master Jet? It is very nice to see you again, but... to what do I owe the pleasure? I am sure that you are too busy to visit every random returnee."

She looked at him for a couple of seconds, then suddenly yawned and shook her head to chase away sleepiness. New novel chapters are published on Freewebnovel.com.

"...Correct. But since there's some procedure you still have to go through and we already know each other, I thought that I'd do the honors."

With that, she looked around the deserted corridor of the hospital complex with a dubious expression, lingered for a couple of seconds, and then asked:

"Wanna eat?"

Some time later, the two of them were walking through the ground level of the Academy hospital. Sunny had thought that Master Jet would take him to the cafeteria there, but instead, she headed toward the exit.

"Uh... where are we going? I thought that cafeteria was this way?"

She looked at him with confusion, then grimaced slightly.

"Hospital food? No thanks. Let me take you to the Instructors Lounge. That's where they keep the really good stuff."

Sunny coughed.

"But, Master Jet... you're not an instructor?"

She smiled, then pointed to the three-star insignia on her left sleeve.

"Technically, I'm not. But the Academy is a government facility, so I outrank most of the people here. What are they going to do?"

He blinked a couple of times, then shrugged.

Indeed, what are they going to do? Tell a Master to get out? Who would be that suicidal?

As they exited the hospital complex and walked across the Academy grounds, Sunny couldn't help but throw furtive glances at the confident young woman. Not because he was mesmerized by her, but because seeing her again was a strange experience.

Back when they first met, he was just fresh from the First Nightmare, barely accustomed to his new status as a Sleeper. Being in the presence of a Master was like standing in front of a legend. He remembered vividly how much fear and awe this beautiful stranger inspired in him.

How acutely he felt the measure of ease with which she would be able to kill him, if she wished. All it would take was a flick of her finger.

Now, slightly more than a year later, so much had changed. He was still pretty sure that he had no chance of taking her in a fight, a fair one at least, but the reverent fear was gone, replaced by simple respect. Sunny knew that he had it in himself to if not win, then at least survive a confrontation with someone like Jet.

In a sense, he was now half a legend himself.

As he thought about how different things had become, the two of them approached a small, picturesque building near the center of the Academy.

Without slowing down, Master Jet walked past a few people that were staring at her with a strange mix of regard and disdain, and entered the Instructors Lodge.

'Oh, right... I remember Teacher Julius mentioning that she has a terrible reputation. To be exact, he described her as a "murderous savage", "barbarian", "having a problematic personality", and "psychopathic killer". Uh...'

No wonder people were giving them weird looks throughout the whole walk.

For some reason, Sunny suddenly felt annoyed. Maybe because Jet was someone he knew, or maybe because she used to be an outskirt rat just like him, but he found himself feeling... protective.

'Stare away, bastards... see if we give a damn.'

Master Jet clearly didn't, so why would he?

Sunny looked at the next person to give her a dirty glance coldly, activating the murder math to its fullest potential. Immediately, the onlooker paled slightly and turned away.

Sunny smiled.

'That's right, look away. Now... the most important part. Let's see what the Instructors eat!'

Chapter 364: SS Class Sunless

Sunny stared at Master Jet, a strange expression frozen on his face. After a while, he asked:

"...That's great, but... what the hell does "SS" mean?"

She smiled and sipped her tea, looking at him across the table. Placing the cup back down, she then shook her head slightly and said:

"The government — and the powerful Legacy clans, of course — keeps track of every Awakened in the world. That shouldn't be a surprise for you, right?"

Sunny slowly nodded.

"Yeah, that makes sense."

Master Jet shifted slightly, then continued:

"Firstly, because every Awakened technically has a duty to respond when a Gate opens near their location — that's what the special communicator is for. In exchange for all the privileges we receive, we have to protect this world from the Nightmare Creatures."

A dark grimace appeared on her face.

"Of course, realistically, no one can force you to actually fulfill that duty, or at least no one is going to. Many Awakened turn around and run as soon as they receive a Gate Crisis alert."

Sunny grimaced. On one hand, he understood such a reaction perfectly. Why would they want to risk their lives for random strangers? Not every Awakened was good in a fight, too. Not everyone was like the Artisans of the Dark City, who had gone into battle side by side with those Dreamers who possessed combat Aspects.

...But on the other hand, the idea of running away while monsters were devouring mundane humans and wreaking havoc in the real world simply rubbed him the wrong way. It seemed as though Sunny had somehow developed a bit of pride in the past year. He didn't want to run from the Nightmare Creatures and capitulate to the Spell. He might have even been infected with having morals...

'Better squish this lunacy fast...'

Oblivious to his thoughts, Master Jet continued:

"Secondly, newly Awakened are monitored because everyone wants to recruit the best of them. Talents need to be nurtured, and for that, they need to be recognized first. So the most promising Awakened receive a mark on their file. Usually, it's SA, or simply S. Do you know what that means?"

Sunny shook his head.

She grinned.

"SA means 'strategic asset'. There's not a lot of Awakened who are considered to be important enough to be assigned that designation. Having one means that you are viewed as a person who can potentially be important to the very survival of humanity, or at least make an impact on the global scale. Simply put, it's either someone whose Aspect can be extremely useful to society or someone who has a high chance of becoming a Master, maybe even a Saint."

Master Jet took another sip of tea, then gestured lazily at herself.

"Like me. Not to brag, but people with the S designation are few and far between. That's why we usually receive a lot of attention and support from either the government or the Legacy faction we decide to align with. But here comes the best part..."

She grinned.

"Currently, everyone is running around and foaming at their mouths because of you guys. All hundred of those who returned from the Forgotten Shore were marked as strategic assets. That is... that is an unprecedented event in human history. A sudden appearance of a hundred powerful Awakened is not that important in the grand scheme of things. But if those Awakened all have a very high chance of becoming Masters, maybe even Saint... that would be enough to completely shatter the current status quo."

Sunny stared at her, thinking. Up until now, everything that he heard was in accordance with how he had imagined things to be. But...

"I get it. However, what's that about me being marked as SS? What does SS stand for?"

Master Jet nodded.

"I was about to explain. Above those marked as strategic assets, there are those marked as special strategic assets. SSA, or SS for short. This designation is even rarer. Actually, very few people had ever gotten it. What it means is that you are considered to have a very high chance of becoming a Saint. You know how rare Transcendent are, right? So, of course, everyone now wants to be your friend. Including the government. Hence the seventh rank citizen status."

She looked at him with an apologetic smile and added:

"...Granted, out of the five people with the SS designation, you are the least outstanding. No offence."

Sunny glanced at her and smiled slightly.

"None taken. Who are the other four?"

Master Jet shrugged.

"Three of them are the only ones who received True Names from the Spell after leaving the Forgotten Shore — Awakened Athena, Awakened Kai, and Awakened Cassia. The fourth one is Awakened Song Sei Shan, who is...

well... from one of the great clans. To be honest, your own achievements — while still incredible — pale in comparison to theirs. But someone had noted that you went from being the second to last in the Academy rating to leading a hundred Sleepers to the Gateway during the last leg of the journey. You are seen as someone with great growth potential, in short."

He nodded, somewhat satisfied by that answer.

'It's not as bad as I thought.'

Actually, it was perfect. It was exactly the result he had hoped for — to be considered one of the best, but also the worst of the best.

He needed status to receive all the best opportunities in this world. He needed to have value.

Looking at the beautiful Ascended in front of him, Sunny took a sip of the tea, then smiled brightly.

"So, uh... that really sounds great. A great honor, and so on. But what I really want to know is what exactly can I get thanks to being the fifth most incredible person of an entire generation?"

Master Jet laughed and glanced at him with approval.

"Good. Straight to the point. Well, that depends. What is it that you want the most?"

Sunny didn't hesitate before answering, his tone steady and firm:

"To be free."

The smile disappeared from her face. Looking down at her tea, Master Jet lingered for a while, and then said wistfully:

"Then you're out of luck. I am sorry, but freedom is just a myth, Sunless. No one is free in this world. Mundane humans have to toil and struggle to remain alive. Even if they are fortunate enough to reach the height of success and acquire great wealth, their lives still belong to the Awakened

who protect them from the Nightmare Creatures. But the Awakened... we are not free, too. Our lives belong to the Spell."

She paused, then added with slight sadness:

"If we want to survive its trials, we need to tether ourselves to others, be it powerful clans, or the government, or even just the members of our cohort. We have to depend on our allies and companions, and they in turn have to depend on us. All of us are chained to one another, Sunless, and that is the only way we can survive. So... think again about what you want. Think carefully."

Sunny stared at her for a long time, his eyes full of a dark, deep, heavy emotion. After a while, he sighed slowly, then said:

"If that is the case, then I want to be strong."

Chapter 365: Young Prospect | Shadow Slave

Master Jet looked at him for a while, then smiled.

"Perfect. That is a good goal to have... especially for people like us."

She took a sip of tea, then closed her eyes for a few moments.

"...Alright. There are many ways to become strong, some more straightforward than others. Ideally, you would want a powerful organization backing you up, but that is not the only way. In fact, such a partnership is a double-edged sword. You gain a lot, but also have to give a lot in return. I'll provide you with the basic information, and you can decide for yourself."

Sunny straightened a little and listened to her attentively. Master Jet thought for a few seconds, and then said:

"In this next few days, you will have to decide what Citadel to go to. That is not the same as joining a faction, but closely tied to it. Usually, young Awakened have to compete for the right to join a desirable faction and therefore be taken to the Citadel it operates from. Your case is different, though. Everyone wants you... and I mean everyone. So you can pick any of the human Citadels in the Dream Realm to call home."

She paused, yawned, and then continued:

"As you should already know, there are three great human Citadels in the Dream Realm, as well as many smaller ones. The primary Citadels belong to the great clans, while the smaller ones can be either ruled by a lesser clan or remain independent. Regardless, all of them are situated around the three main human enclaves and tied to them in one form or another. No matter where you go, you'll be in the sphere of influence of one of the great clans, it's just that you can be either in its center, close to the center, or on the periphery."

Sunny scratched his head.

"What about the government? Doesn't the government control many Citadels?"

Master Jet shook her head.

"Out there in the Dream Real, the government has less influence than the great clans. It does, however, maintain a presence in all the important Citadels, which allows us to play a unique role. In the Dream Realm, we serve as a... connective tissue between the three factions, I guess. That flexibility has its own benefits, if you ask me."

She knocked lightly on the table and said:

"In any case, even if you decide to refuse the obvious choice of settling in one of the great Citadels, you'll have to select one of the three territories. They are not connected, as some people think. In fact, there are deadly and extremely hazardous regions separating each of the human dominions from each other. So, that is going to be your first decision — which territory to choose.

That made sense. If Sunny chose to go to Bastion, for example, he would have the opportunity to build a relationship with the great clan Valor, which ruled it, or any of the lesser clans in its sphere of influence. He would lose the opportunity to be recruited into the great clan Song, though, or any other clan that existed in a separate human territory. And so on.

Master Jet finished her tea and looked at the empty cup with a solemn expression.

"Oh, yeah. This is where I was supposed to give you the recruitment speech and try to convince you to join the government forces. But I'm not going to... you are smart enough to figure out the pros and cons of that path by yourself. All I will say is that you will never be truly accepted as an equal by the members of the Legacy clans — SS designation or not. Maybe they won't say it to your face, but you'll always be treated as someone... a tiny bit lesser. At best."

Sunny's expression darkened. Caster's face suddenly appeared in his mind, eyes full of disdain.

What had the proud scion called him... a mongrel?

'...Well, that mongrel got to your throat. Who's laughing now?'

Master Jet had a similar kind of expression on her face. Had she experienced her own share of hardships because of her lowly background? Most likely.

As Sunny was pondering what Master Jet's path to becoming an Ascended must have looked like, she sighed, then smiled with irony.

"Not that entering a Legacy clan is a bad deal. Actually, it's a dream come true for many, most even. With your renown, Sunless, any clan would be happy to give you patronage. Some might even adopt you. Hell... with your looks, even marriage is not out of the question!"

As Sunny choked on his tea and did an actual spit take, Master Jet laughed.

"Marriage... what marriage?!"

She shook her head.

"How do you think Legacy clans recruit talents? There are patronage contracts, adoptions, and matrimony, the latter being the preferred method when it comes to true gems. Anything to enhance the bloodline, you know."

As Sunny stared at her with wide eyes, Master Jet chuckled and continued:

"In any case, these are your options. You can go with the government, one of the three great clans, or a lesser clan. Each will provide you with plenty of incentives to join them instead of others. The most wealthy factions will even shower you with soul shards. You and I both know how important those are. Few people can refuse such an offer."

She sighed wistfully, lingered for a bit, and then added:

"Of course, you can also remain independent. In that case, you won't have any special support outside the usual benefits of being a highly regarded Awakened — be it in the form of training, resources, or access. But you also won't be tied down by any obligations, free to travel around the Dream Realm as you wish, making a living by hunting Nightmare Creatures or providing useful services to your Citadel of choice. There are plenty of independent Awakened out there, although few who are truly successful. It's a tough way to live."

Sunny rubbed his face, feeling slightly overwhelmed by the cornucopia of choices in front of him.

He had no need for soul shard, but being showered in them still seemed like a great experience.

Master Jet grinned.

"...So? What do you think?"

He hesitated for a while, then said:

"I don't know. That's a lot to take in. I'll... have to think about many things before making a decision."

She nodded, as though that was an expected answer.

"Good. Nothing good can come from rushing such a matter."

With that, Master Jet took a small, secure plastic container out of her pocket and pushed it to Sunny. He took it and raised an eyebrow.

"What's that?"

She shrugged.

"A pack of military-grade stimulants to keep you awake for a while. Don't use more than one patch at a time... wait, why am I explaining this to you? You're from the outskirts, so your knowledge of stimulant use must be extensive. In any case, with that, you'll be able to stay lucid for about a

week. Contact me when you're ready to make a decision, and I'll arrange the rest. Oh, also feel free to call me if you have any questions... scratch that. Not any questions, just important ones."

She stood up, stretched a little, and gave him a little smile.

"Well... it's been nice seeing you, Awakened Sunless. You did well, staying alive out there. Warms my heart to know that another one of us did. I'll be off, then. Time waits for no one, and all that."

She turned around to walk away, but Sunny stopped her:

"Uh... Master Jet?"

She glanced at him in confusion.

"Yeah?"

Sunny hesitated for a bit, then raised his newly issued, expensive, slick communicator:

"I, uh... I don't have your contact?"

Master Jet stared at him for a while, then grinned.

"Want to get my number, huh?"

Feeling his ears turning slightly red, Sunny coughed, but then took hold of himself and said with an easy smile:

"Yes. How else am I going to call you when I've made a decision?"

The beautiful woman shook her head, then took his communicator and entered her contact information into it.

Returning the communicator to Sunny, she looked at him and said:

"...Can't wait to hear from you, Awakened Sunless. See you later, then."

With that, Master Jet walked away, leaving Sunny alone at the table.

Looking around, he sat in silence for a while.

Finally, he said quietly:

"I wonder... can I get another of everything I ate? That'd be great..."

Chapter 366: Lessons of History

Some time later, Sunny exited the Instructors Lounge. The clear winter day welcomed him with chilly wind and tiny snowflakes dancing in the sunlight. Despite being dressed very lightly — his skin was covered only by the soft fabric of the simple training suit provided to him by the staff of the Academy hospital complex — Sunny did not feel too cold.

'That's being Awakened for you, I guess.'

If it had been a year and a few months ago, he would have been desperately searching for shelter, hoping that he would not freeze to death overnight or, even worse, get sick. But now, Sunny felt great. He wasn't even uncomfortable.

Pulling down his sleeves to hide the serpent tattoo, he inhaled the cool, perfectly filtered air, smiled, and started walking.

'Decisions, decisions...'

The conversation with Master Jet had been useful, but left him with more questions than answers. Each of the choices presented to him had alluring benefits, but also very serious drawbacks.

'Great clans, lesser clans, government, or independent?'

Sunny tried to imagine himself as a Legacy and silently shook his head. All that prestige, all that wealth, the admiration of the masses... being a Legacy meant being a part of the nobility, the elite above all elites. It was the exact opposite of what Sunny had been all his life.

...But who said that he had to remain the same in the future? From a pauper to a prince, that would be a nice transformation. Lord Sunless... that had a nice ring to it, didn't it?

There were serious disadvantages to making such a choice, of course.

Working for the government offered its own advantages, but at the cost of not receiving as much funds and resources, while being tied down by too many obligations. Both times Sunny had met Master Jet, she seemed busy and overworked. He couldn't imagine pursuing his goals with such a schedule.

One of the functions of the Awakened forces in service to the government was hunting down rogue members of their own kind. Awakened were people, after all, and there were criminals among them, too. Especially because many were traumatized and driven to the edge of madness by their experiences in the Nightmares and the Dream Realm.

If Sunny could absorb the essence of those humans he killed like all the other Awakened, that path could have offered him a faster track to saturating his cores. But as it was, he didn't see himself putting on the uniform, unless there were new Gates opening every day, thus providing him with the endless supply of Nightmare Creatures to hunt.

...By the way, how many Gates were opening in a given year, on average? Suddenly, Sunny realized that he had no idea. The propaganda never mentioned concrete numbers, only the fact that valiant Awakened had the situation under control. Did they, really?

The last option was to remain independent. That choice was seemingly in contradiction to his desire to acquire status and as many benefits as possible, but only on the surface. In fact, Sunny had already received most of what he wanted by becoming a high-ranking citizen and getting a free pick of any Citadel. Of course, not having the vast resources of a Legacy clan or the government would be a huge loss... but it would also provide the best chance he had to keep all his secrets to himself.

All three options were worthy of being considered.

In the end, it all came to the fact that he simply didn't have enough information to make a decision. So, getting information was his first priority. But... how?

'What was it called... a library? The Academy has to have one of those, right?'

Sunny, of course, had never been to a library, but he was familiar with the concept. There were similar types of public terminals in the outskirts, too, although using them cost credits. He had never had any to spare, so his visits were few and far between. And he went there for entertainment, not to study.

Now that Sunny had himself a state-of-the-art communicator, he could access a lot of information from the network, but doing so would doubtlessly leave a digital trail behind. Considering that some of the topics he wanted to research were rather dangerous, he wanted to remain as anonymous as possible.

'A library it is...'

Ten minutes later, he approached a square white building. Like most of the Academy, its walls were made out of smooth, pristine alloy, with wide windows that could be covered at any moment with reinforced shutters. There weren't many people in sight, so Sunny assumed that the library was not a popular destination among the Awakened.

Why would it be, if most of the information stored there could be accessed remotely? He was the weirdo for coming here in person.

Entering through an automatic door, Sunny looked around and blinked a couple of times.

Everywhere he looked, tall shelves full of paper books stretched into the distance. Between them stood tables meant for study, with several young men and women reading behind them silently. Most of them were using terminals to take notes, but some were actually writing by hand.

'What... the hell... is that?'

All those books, of course, were printed on synthetic paper... but why have them printed at all?! Wouldn't it be way more convenient to read from a

terminal, like all normal people did?

He had never seen a physical book in his life. The very idea of using one was mind-boggling.

...But then, it made sense. Digital data storage technology was highly advanced, but susceptible to various types of damage. During the dark times... which came before the even darker times of the Nightmare Spell... back when humanity had been consumed by an endless series of devastating wars and cataclysmic natural disasters, a lot of knowledge had been lost due to overreliance on digital mediums. Whole layers of culture were irrevocably gone as the result.

Paper was still the safest way to preserve knowledge.

It's just Sunny had never thought about it before.

'Still weird...'

Trying to not show his confusion, Sunny furtively looked around and noticed a member of the library staff. It was a young man... no, wait... a young woman? A young person, with short black hair and intelligent brown eyes, who was currently reading a vintage-looking book. There was a badge on her chest, with the name "Ren" written on it.

At least Sunny thought that it was a name. Maybe it was some weird title among the librarians. Who knew what kind of strange customs they had here?

Approaching the young librarian, he stopped a couple of meters away and waited patiently to be noticed. However, "Ren" continued to read, fully engrossed in whatever story the book told, eyes full of deep emotion. Curious, Sunny looked at the title on the cover.

'Free Fall... sounds familiar. Must be a really great book. Maybe I should read it someday...'

"Uh... hey? Can I get some directions?"

Ren lingered for a couple of seconds, then reluctantly put down the novel and looked at him with a neutral smile.

"Of course. How can I help you?"

He lingered for a bit, then said with uncertainty:

"How can I read about the Dream Realm and the current state of human expansion into its various regions?"

Ren blinked a couple of times, then asked politely:

"Uh... can you be more specific?"

Sunny sighed.

"I want to see a map and a list of all the Citadels out there, as well as learn who owns what and why. I guess."

The librarian smiled brightly:

"Ah, you are a lover of history as well! Of course, of course. You have come to the right place. We have all the records you'll ever need here. Nickel!"

Sunny flinched.

"Nickel? What does nickel mean? What is happening?"

Suddenly, another young librarian appeared out of nowhere. This one was definitely a guy, wearing a wrinkled white shirt and a brown vest. He was tall and handsome, with slightly disheveled red hair, scruffy bristle on his chin, and a friendly face. There was a badge on his vest, too, with the word "Nickel" written on it.

The two were a strange pair.

"Nickel, could you please escort this young man to the Dream Realm History section?"

The tall librarian glanced at Sunny and gave him a wide smile.

"Sure. Please, follow me."

They headed into the depths of the library, leaving Ren behind. A few moments later, Sunny heard the rustle of paper pages coming from behind. The smaller librarian was once again engrossed in the book.

'Yeah, I should definitely check that novel out. A citizen of the seventh rank should be well-read, right?'

Nickel led him through the library, asking a few questions to narrow down the search. Soon, they arrived in front of a particular set of shelves, full of books having to do with the Dream Realm and the history of humanity's slow exploration of it.

The young man helped Sunny select a few, wished him luck, and disappeared as quietly and swiftly as he had appeared. Sunny looked at the spot where Nickel had been just a few moments ago, then slowly shook his head.

'A librarian... that guy could have been an assassin, instead.'

Well... maybe he was. Come to think about it, working in a library could be a perfect cover for clandestine operators.

'Maybe I should become a librarian, too...'

Making sure that no one was watching him, Sunny put his books on a nearby table and walked back to the shelves. There, he stared at a certain book that he had noticed a few minutes ago.

Its title was simple:

"The Immortal Flame"

Sunny hesitated for a bit, and then took the book off the shelf.

He was pretty sure that the Sovereigns were at least partially responsible for the fall of Neph's clan. If so, there had to be some hints of their identity in the history of the Immortal Flame.

'This has to be a good place to start looking for some answers... right?'

Chapter 367: Fog of Time

Sunny brought the book back to the table and sat down, looking at the plain cover with a complicated expression.

Of course, he knew a few things about the Immortal Flame clan. Everybody did, considering how prominent the achievements of its members were — even though Sunny missed out on receiving a proper education, the legendary figures of Changing Star's father and grandfather had long ago found their way from the pages of history into the popular culture.

Their names were pretty much synonymous with heroism and the indomitable nature of the human spirit, famously painted with a tinge of tragedy.

Immortal Flame was the first Awakened to become a Master, and Broken Sword, his son-in-law, was the first Master to become a Saint. Of course, they had not done so alone — each had a group of powerful companions to share the burden of challenging the Spell. So, a more proper statement would have been that they were the leaders of the first cohorts to conquer the Second and Third Nightmares.

However, the names of their comrades were not as well known. Sunny was sure that kids learned about them in school, but a street rat like him only had a general impression of who they were. Mostly, he just remembered that some of them would go on to establish the great clans.

But that was the thing about heroes. Sunny had once told Effie that one had to die to become a hero, and that was not a joke. A person could possess renown and respect for achieving something incredible, but it was the act of making the ultimate sacrifice that elevated one to heroic status.

That's why the Immortal Flame clan was revered much more than the other great clans — not only because the leaders of those cohorts came from it, but also because it had a tragic end.

...Or had it? If Nephis did manage to return to the real world, the fame of her clan would burn bright once again, perhaps even brighter than ever before. The survivors of the Dreamer Army already treated her like a deity...

With a sudden frown, Sunny awkwardly opened the book and started reading. Accustomed to reading off a screen, he struggled for a bit with the printed text, but then quickly got used to it and engrossed himself in the illustrious history of the famed clan.

The first part was dedicated to Immortal Flame himself, and although it was interesting, there was not a lot of information there that Sunny could use. He already knew that Neph's grandfather had been among the first wave of people infected by the Nightmare Spell, and that he fought against the Nightmare Creatures during the initial mayhem that followed its appearance.

Back then, millions of people were suddenly thrust into the First Nightmares and died, resulting in millions of Nightmare Creatures entering the real world. Of course, almost all of them were only of the Dormant rank, but even that turned out to be too much for the armies of the already reeling humanity to handle. Whole nations were destroyed, and for a while, the planet was submerged into absolute chaos.

It was only thanks to people like Immortal Flame — who had not earned his True Name yet back then, of course — that the situation changed. There were those who had survived the First Nightmare, then entered the Dream Realm and carved their path to Gateways. After returning to the real world, they united and fought back against the tide of Nightmare Creatures, eventually establishing a new world order.

The one that existed to this day.

'They were tough, tough people.'

Becoming an Awakened was hard enough even today, with all the accumulated knowledge about the Spell being freely accessible to everyone. Back when it first appeared, people like Immortal Flame didn't know anything. They didn't know what an Aspect was, how many ranks and

classes of the Nightmare Creatures were there, what they meant, what the Memories and Echoes were, what a Gateway was...

Most important of all, they didn't even know if saving humanity was even possible.

And yet, somehow, they learned and fought back. Sunny couldn't imagine how dark and hellish that time must have been. Truly, they deserved his respect.

...But, sadly, they didn't deserve his time. At least not now. He had much more pressing things on his plate, so Sunny just skimmed through the pages describing Immortal Flame's life, his eventual triumph over the Second Nightmare, and heroic death.

The legendary Master died defending the evacuating cities from the onslaught of terrible creatures that entered the real world through a Category Five Gate. That happened just a year or so before Sunny was born, and had cost humanity an entire continent.

It was also the event that led to Neph's mother becoming Hollow, although that tragedy was not described in the book in great detail. All that was said about it was that Smile of Heaven died during the disaster while protecting civilians.

Sunny sighed, then concentrated on reading about Broken Sword.

Neph's father was not a Legacy by birth. In fact, he came from a very humble background, and rose from absolute obscurity to the very pinnacle of prominence thanks only to his talent and battle genius. He was a pauper who had won the heart of a princess and became the heir of the most venerated clan in human history.

The narrative of the book framed the history in a way that suggested that Broken Sword had been heartbroken by the death of his wife, and that it was this loss that drove him to rise even higher and challenge the Third Nightmare. Miraculously, Broken Sword succeeded, becoming the first Saint.

There was no happy end to his story, though. Just a few years later, he perished in the Dream Realm while exploring a region that would later be categorized as a Death Zone.

The book ended with a long-winded tribute to the two legendary heroes and an explanation of how important their contributions were to the survival and future prosperity of the human race.

Sunny closed the book and shook his head.

'...What a load of crap.'

He might not have been educated, but like most people in the outskirts, Sunny had the instinctive skill of recognizing propaganda and reading between the lines of official statements. And this was what the book was — an embellished, partially fictional version of events that the government liked to feed to people. The truth was hard to come by.

There were several things about the supposed history of the Immortal Flame clan that didn't make a lot of sense to Sunny.

The first one was the circumstances of Smile of Heaven's tragic death. On paper, everything seemed fine, but Sunny knew that she was not, in fact, dead — not in the traditional sense of the word, at least. She was Hollow.

But how could she become Hollow? According to the book, at that point in time, Broken Sword had already become a Master. The two of them were partners both in life and in battle, leading their cohort together. That would suggest that Smile of Heaven was a Master, too.

But Masters traveled to the Dream Realm physically as opposed to in spirit, like Sleepers and Awakened did. There would have been no soulless body left behind if she had died there, so... how was it possible?

'The timeline doesn't add up...'

The second questionable point was Broken Sword's own death. Saints were extremely powerful beings, and killing one was not an easy task. Even

when met with an overwhelming foe, a Saint should have been able to at least escape.

Saints simply did not die unless they had a reason to stand their ground and fight to the last breath. The only creatures that could kill them instantly were too powerful and rare to stumble on one randomly, even when exploring an unknown region of the Dream Realm.

Would Broken Sword have been so reckless and stubborn, knowing that he had a daughter who needed his care and protection? The legendary swordsman didn't strike Sunny as someone who would allow himself to die easily... unless some other forces were involved.

And finally, there were the other members of his cohort.

Sunny whispered their names:

"Broken Sword, Smile of Heaven, Asterion, Ki Song, Anvil of the Valor clan."

Asterion, Ki Song, Anvil of Valor...

'Aster, Song, Vale?'

Chapter 368: Aster, Song, Vale

Sunny spent several hours reading the book about the history of the Immortal Clan book, and now, finally, he was starting to feel sleepy. Not to the point of needing to use the stimulants provided to him by Master Jet, but enough to make it harder for him to concentrate.

Rubbing his face, he mentally repeated the names of Broken Sword's companions — the brilliant warriors who had become the first Saints of the human race.

'Asterion, Ki Song, Anvil of the Valor clan.'

Were they the Aster, Song, and Vale?

While not exactly the same, the names of the members of the legendary cohort were too similar to the three words that Nephis had once told him to never say out loud — among a couple of others — to be merely a coincidence.

'Let's see. What do I really know about all that stuff?'

Sunny knew that the three words held enough meaning to free Neph from the haze of the Soul Devourer's mind hex, at least partially. She had reacted to them very strongly... so much so that Sunne had actually been afraid for his life for a bit there.

She had also asked him a strange question...

He repeated it mentally, careful to not say anything out loud:

'Which Domain do you belong to?!'

Sunny had had no idea what a capital letter Domain was back then, and he didn't know now. But he was, indeed, sure that there was a capital letter there. He also suspected that people who had been trying to kill Nephis for most of her life were connected to these mysterious Domains.

Which meant that Caster had been, too. From that, it wasn't hard to conclude that Domains and Sovereigns — who apparently willed the destruction of the Immortal Flame clan — were tied together, or more likely the same.

And all of it had something to do with Lineage Memories and the Attributes they bestowed, like [The Fire] Attribute that was described as the lineage of the Sun God.

Or his own [Blood Weave], which was apparently both incomplete and forbidden.

Sunny massaged his temples and sighed.

For a long time, he had no clue about what Aster, Song, and Vale meant. But after meeting Seishan, an adopted daughter of the great clan Song, he began to suspect that they were the names of the three Legacy Clans responsible for the numerous attempts on Neph's life... and maybe even the deaths of her parents and the downfall of the Immortal Flame clan.

Not only because of his inherent dislike of Legacies, but also because of how peculiar Changing Star had described her relationship with the Handmaiden:

'Trusted? Not really... never, actually.'

Why would Nephis say that she would never, ever trust Seishan? Maybe it was because Seishan belonged to one of the clans responsible for the undoing of her family. That was a logical assumption.

...But now, Sunny saw that, maybe, he was wrong. Maybe Aster, Song, and Vale weren't the names of clans — maybe, these were the nicknames belonging to three people.

Asterion, Ki Song, and Anvil of clan Valor.

They were Broken Sword's companions, and as such, Nephis had to have met them a lot before her father died. Neither Broken Sword himself nor his

daughter would have been addressing them by their full names, either. What would she call them?

Uncle Aster? Auntie Song?

Sunny looked down, a dark expression appearing on his face.

If these were really the people that had later sent numerous assassins to hunt down the little girl who trusted them... then the hatred Nephis had for them would be easy to explain.

...It would also be easy to explain how a Saint of Broken Sword's talent and might had died. Maybe... maybe he had been stabbed in the back by the people he trusted the most.

Even though there was no proof, it all made too much sense. Sunny felt that he was on the right track.

But how were Asterion, Ki Song, and Anvil of clan Valor connected to the mysterious Sovereigns? Did they serve them, or...

His eyes widened. A terrible suspicion entered his mind... not, not a suspicion.

A certainty.

'...It's them. They are the Sovereigns!'

The revelation hit him like a hurricane squall, too vast to comprehend all at once. And the key to it was a simple sentence that Nephis had once told him while overwhelmed by intense emotions.

How did he miss it?

Back when they had their falling out in a deserted alley of the outer settlement, Neph said:

'...You think Gunlaug can stop me? You think a Fallen Terror can stop me? Those three ghouls can stop me? No, Sunny. Nothing will stop me. Anyone

who dares will die. I'll kill them all.'

She had listed her enemies! She listed them in the order of magnitude. First Gunlaug, then the Crimson Terror. And then, the Sovereigns.

Three ghouls.

Aster, Song, and Vale.

Just as he was trying to cope with that idea, another frightening realization appeared in Sunny's mind. He shuddered.

Recalling another thing that Nephis had said, he then mumbled quietly:

'...No, I won't be the first one to conquer the Fourth Nightmare. I will be the first one to conquer every Nightmare.'

Back then, he had understood her as wishing to be the first one to beat the Fourth Nightmare, as well as all the rest. But her words could have been interpreted in a different way...

Among the Awakened, there was a general agreement that the names of the Ranks were not coincidental. Many people thought that the words used by the Spell described the ascent toward godhood... or the descent into profanity, as far as Nightmare Creatures were concerned. In many ways, these two paths were reflections of each other.

A person of a third Rank was described as Ascended, since they were rising above their human nature. A creature of the same Rank was called Fallen. This step had to do with ascension, or the opposite of it.

A person of the fourth Rank was described as Transcendent, since they had transcended the mundane and assumed some qualities of the divine. A creature of the same Rank was called Corrupted. This step had to do with transformation... it was no coincidence that the Aspect Ability the Saints received was called a Transformation Ability, after all.

The next step also had a special meaning to it. It represented authority and reign. Be it Supreme or Great, beings of that level were meant to

consolidate their power and exert it upon the world. The fifth step of the Class hierarchy was much the same, allowing Nightmare Creatures to create and control armies of lesser minions.

Such creatures were called Tyrants...

What would a human who had reached the Supreme Rank be called, then?

Sunny trembled.

'A Sovereign...'

Nephis had not meant that she would not only be the first human to conquer the Fourth Nightmare, but also all the rest. She had meant that she would be first to conquer the Fifth, the Sixth, and the Seventh.

Because the Fourth Nightmare had already been conquered!

'Gods...'

Ki of the great clan Song, Anvil of the great clan Valor, and a person called Asterion had conquered it. And Broken Sword of the Immortal Flame... Broken Sword had been mysteriously killed in the process.

Aster, Song, and Vale had returned from the Fourth Nightmare wreathed in new authority, while Broken Sword perished. What was a Domain? Possibly the expression of the fifth Aspect Ability they had received, a special one, just like the special Transformation Ability the Saints possessed.

And, for some reason, they had chosen to keep their accomplishment a secret, instead exerting their influence on humanity from the shadows.

Wasn't it strange, that their names seemed to practically disappear from the pages of history after Broken Sword died? They, too, were the first to become Saints, after all.

Not if they had chosen to keep them hidden.

Wasn't it strange that Caster of Han Li clan seemed so loyal to the mysterious Sovereigns who had ordered him to kill the last daughter of the Immortal Flame clan?

Not if they were the real power behind the great Legacy clans, to which his own lesser clan was beholden.

Wasn't it hard to believe that there were words that could kill just by becoming known to a person?

...Not if those words were the names of the three Supreme rulers that preferred to remain nameless.

Sunny moaned slightly, then covered his face his hands.

'...Crap. Crap. Crap! Why did I have to go and get myself involved in all this crap?!

He had a feeling that his life had just become much more complicated.

Chapter 369: Hidden Forces | Shadow Slave

Sunny spent some time staring at the pile of books in front of him with a dark expression. After a while, he sighed heavily.

So, there were hidden forces out there that exerted influence over the entire human race. The authority was as invisible as it was frightening. And now, he knew their names. The Sovereigns were at least as powerful as the government, or maybe even more so.

The exact relationship between these two hegemonic powers — one official, the other secretive — was not clear, but for now, knowing the full extent of the authority resting in the hands of the Sovereigns was not that important.

However, it was important to know that the world was not at all as he had imagined. It was much more dangerous.

Why?

Because if there was one thing that all wielders of authority shared, it was the animosity toward others encroaching on their power. That was just human nature — among the strong, only one entity could be the strongest. And so, that entity was always apprehensive of others growing stronger.

Bosses of criminal gangs in the outskirts were always paranoid of their lieutenants usurping them, and tended to violently get rid of those who were too successful. In the Dark City, Gunlaug reigned with an iron fist, destroying anyone who dared to be strong without submitting to his rule.

And Sovereigns would be much the same.

Since Sunny was already powerful beyond reason, for a person of his age at least, and had an even more frightening potential, the Sovereigns would never allow him to exist outside their control.

Luckily, they did not know the true extent of his strength yet.

But since his main goal was to become stronger — as strong as he possibly could, as fast as he possibly could, to not fall behind Nephis — that... was going to be a problem.

Suddenly, some things about the Awakened society became more clear.

A long time ago, Sunny had learned that Master Jet had no chance of ever becoming a Saint. Apparently, one had to have a team of outstanding companions and a lot of support to attempt conquering the Third Nightmare, and she lacked both due to her "problematic personality".

Would Sovereigns allow someone outside their grasp to become a Saint? Most resources and knowledge about the Dream Realm belonged to the Legacy clans, especially when it came to anything having to do with higher Ranks. And the clans were controlled by the Sovereigns... which basically meant that they could prevent anyone from becoming a Saint simply by refusing their support.

How many talented Masters like Jet were being suppressed from growing more powerful because they didn't serve one of the Supremes? There were a couple of Saints serving the government, at least. Whom were they really loyal to?

'Hate it... I hate it so much...'

Of course, Sunny knew that all of this was just his conjecture. And yet, one thing was certain: the choice presented to him by Master Jet was not as straightforward as he had thought.

In truth, he wasn't deciding between the great clans, the lesser clans, the government, and independence. He was deciding between entering into the service to the Sovereigns or refusing it.

And that choice was strained even further by his connection to Changing Star.

'...Damnation!'

With a sigh, Sunny stared at the bookshelves surrounding him, and then stood up. He had to get a few more books to read...

Many hours later, he tiredly put the last one away and rubbed his face.

Now that he had absorbed a lot of knowledge about the current geography and situation of the Dream Realm, a seed of a plan began to form in his mind. However, he still needed more information. He wouldn't be able to find it here, however.

For that, he would have to visit an old acquaintance.

One thing he did find, nevertheless, was a bit more information about the Sovereigns.

Asterion, Ki Song, and Anvil of Valor.

The last one was possibly the most renowned. An heir of the great clan, he was mentioned many times in the texts describing the human expansion into the northern territories of the Dream Realm, as well as the history of Bastion — one of the three central human Citadels in the Dream Realm. In fact, he had apparently been responsible for slaying the titan whose remains were then used to create the chair Sunny was currently sitting on.

'Strong...'

Later, though, the traces of Saint Anvil disappeared. There was no mention of his death, but the reigns of clan Valor were now in the hands of his cousins... at least officially.

Ki Song was only slightly less famous. Unlike Anvil of Vale, she had come from one of the lesser Legacy clans, and it was by her hand that it was elevated to the status of a great one. The stronghold of clan Song, Ravenheart, was the second major human settlement in the Dream Realm. Its sphere of influence was separated from the other two territories by especially dreadful regions. The border with the Valor clan was especially deadly, but also rather thin.

From what Sunny was able to learn, Ki Song was still the ruler of her clan, although she rarely appeared in public. She was known as a benevolent and charitable person, but that was pretty much all the information he could find. It seemed that it was her adoptive daughters who mostly acted on her behalf. Seishan was one of them, although she was trapped on the Forgotten Shore for too long to be mentioned anywhere.

And lastly, there was a man named Asterion... he was the most mysterious of the three. No one seemed to know where he came from and where he went after the Broken Sword's cohort was disbanded. In fact, there was barely any mention of him at all.

Asterion was not connected to the third great Legacy clan, at least from the looks of it. Or any lesser clan, for that matter. Sunny couldn't even find out when and where he had been born, let alone if he was still alive.

Even in the texts describing the deeds of Broken Sword and his companions, the name Asterion was only mentioned in passing, as though he had never made any important contributions.

Sunny shook his head and scowled.

'Let me guess... he's the most terrifying of the three.'

That was an easy conclusion to make, because... it took one to know one. Sunny himself was barely mentioned and tended to hide his contributions.

'Ugh, my head hurts...'

The worst part was that this was only half of all the research he had to do. He had learned enough about the human position in the Dream Realm and the Sovereigns.

Now, he had to learn as much as he could about the gods, the daemons, and the Unknown.

...It was time to pay Teacher Julius a visit.

Of course, Sunny couldn't visit his old instructor with empty hands.

Pushing the books aside, he activated the terminal embedded into the table, lingered for a few moments, and then typed:

"...All of the Forgotten Shore is separated into three parts, one of which..."

Chapter 370: Exploration Report | Shadow Slave

It took Sunny the rest of the night to compile all of the information he had gathered about the Forgotten Shore into a succinct, comprehensive report. Knowing how passionate Teacher Julius was about researching the Dream Realm, Sunny tried not to miss any important detail.

He had described the geography and environment of the region to the best of his ability, including all the notable landmarks he visited or heard about, as well as the peculiar nature of the dark sea and the Labyrinth. He also described most of the Nightmare Creatures he had seen, met, or fought, writing down everything he knew about their powers, behavior, and weaknesses, writing through the lens of his own experience where he could.

When possible, he included the information received directly from the Spell, complete with the descriptions of Memories and Echoes he knew about. Of course, he provided those texts both in the human tongue and in the runic language.

Lastly, he had written down the results of his exploration and studies into the history of the Forgotten Shore, describing in detail every engraving, every mosaic, and every mural he had seen. He also added his theories about what had happened to the ancient civilization, as well as his observations on how the ancient people of the Forgotten Shore had lived before the fall.

...Of course, there were things that he had kept to himself.

Sunny omitted anything having to do with the nest of the Vile Thieving Bird, the Weaver, and the underground chamber beneath the ruined cathedral. He did not mention the Stone Saint, firstly because he wanted to keep her existence a secret, and secondly because she was connected to the Unknown. He also avoided mentioning his battle against the coral golems and the banishment of the cursed sea, as well as the eventual fate of the Crimson Terror and the destruction of both the artificial sun and the Spire itself.

As far as everyone was concerned, Sunny had left through the Gateway with the rest of the Dreamers. No one had paid attention to his whereabouts in those last minutes, and he wanted to keep it that way. Well... no one except for Effie and Cassie, but he was reasonably sure that they would be discrete about certain things.

And even if they failed to keep their lips sealed, Sunny had ways to explain his actions without revealing the truth.

Finishing the report, Sunny leaned tiredly on the back of his chair and glanced at the screen. There, a long title was shown:

"Exploration Report on the Forgotten Shore, by: Awakened Sunless"

'I think that's good enough.'

Sunny had no idea how to write an academic paper... or a proper field report, for that matter. So he had written and structured this document in a way that would have been the most helpful for his younger self a year ago, when he had entered the Forgotten Shore without knowing anything about it.

A manual such as this would have made so many things easier.

With a sigh, Sunny sent the report to his communicator, then turned off the terminal and stood up.

Stretching his tired body, he swayed a little and yawned. It was already two days since his return to the real world, so the fatigue was slowly accumulating. Soon, he would have to start using the stimulants provided to him by Master Jet... but that moment had not come yet.

Sunny walked away from the table, then hesitated a little and came back. Picking up several books from the orderly pile, he returned them to the proper shelves.

After every book was back to its intended place, he nodded with satisfaction and finally left the library.

'What a fascinating place. I like it there...'

Looking back at the unassuming building, Sunny breathed in the cold winter air and remembered the description of Weaver's Mask:

'Weaver believed that knowledge was the origin of power, and so always hid behind numerous lies...'

What would the Demon of Fate think about this place? It was, after all, a palace of knowledge.

Sunny remembered the deceptive pages that presented a washed, polished version of history and smiled.

'Yeah... but it is also a palace of lies...'

It was weird returning to the Sleeper compound. The low, fortified building was much like he remembered, only weighed down by more snow. Sunny had not spent a lot of time here, but those days before the winter solstice were some of the most memorable in his life.

So much excitement, so much dread...

Who knew that he would not see it again for more than a year?

Entering the familiar hall, he looked around, half-expecting to see a crowd of nervous Sleepers. But, of course, there was no one around — everyone had already left for their first venture into the Dream Realm, and it was too early for the next year's Dreamers to arrive.

Walking through the empty halls, he found his way to the lower levels of the compound and approached the Wilderness Survival classroom, which also served as Teacher Julius's office. Opening the door, he saw the spacious and tastefully decorated room where he had spent most of his short stay at the Academy. Suddenly, Sunny was overwhelmed by a wave of nostalgia.

'...Are you crazy? You're too young to be nostalgic about the good old days!'

His mentor was not at his usual place, sitting behind the wide wooden desk. Instead, the old man was standing in front of a glass case, studying the skull of a ferocious creature stored inside and taking notes.

He hadn't changed at all. Teacher Julius was still old, with messy grey hair, absentminded eyes, and a pair of bushy eyebrows that seemed to have a life of their own. His posture and expression were full of quiet melancholy.

...However, as soon as he heard someone entering the classroom, his face changed, becoming lively and curious once again.

Turning around, the old man stared at the visitor with confusion. Then, his face suddenly lit up with a bright, infectious smile.

"Sunny, my boy!"

Chapter 371: Academic Achievement | Shadow Slave

Teacher Julius was just the same, but Sunny's perception of him had changed. Not only because of how instrumental the things he had learned from the old instructor turned out to be for his survival, but also because of the history books he had just read.

'How old is Teacher Julius, anyway?'

Sunny had never thought about it, but after learning more about Immortal Flame and the first generation of the Awakened, he couldn't help but see his mentor in a new light. Teacher Julius must have been if not of the same age as those legendary figures, then at least of the same generation. Those people had lived through much darker, much more violent times.

They had survived the end of the world, and built a new one from the ruins.

"...Sunny, my boy!"

Before Sunny could react properly, he was subjected to a passionate hug. Then, Teacher Julius unceremoniously pushed him to the nearest chair.

"Finally, you're back! I never doubted that you would return, not even for a moment. No student of mine would allow himself to die easily, you know! Wait, what am I talking about... of course, you know. You're one of my students yourself, after all!"

Sunny couldn't help but smile while listening to the excitement in the old man's voice. Before coming here, he was slightly worried that Teacher Julius would not even remember him.

Despite the fact that his course was not the most popular at the Academy, the eccentric instructor must have mentored thousands of Sleepers throughout his career. What was one more?

But, luckily, Sunny had been wrong.

"But, my boy... a whole year! Did you like it in the Dream Realm so much that you didn't want to return? Did you not think that your old teacher would be worried sick? In the name of the gods, what happened?"

Sunny hesitated a little, then said apologetically:

"Well, Teacher Julius... you see... I ended up in an unexplored region of the Dream Realm. And the only Gateway there was guarded by a Fallen Terror..."

The old man blinked.

"Heavens! How horrible. So what did you do?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Uh, well. In short... I met two beautiful girls, escorted them to an ancient castle, spent a few months exploring a cursed city, went on a long and arduous quest to find a magic crown, killed a devil, helped a princess become a queen, participated in a war or two, climbed an evil tower, and finally ended up near the Gateway. Basically... I survived. Just how you taught me to."

Teacher Julius listened to him very carefully, then nodded a few times

"Great! You did great! Just as expected from one of my students. But, Sunny..."

The old man's eyes suddenly shone brightly, full of excitement.

"Did you say... did you say something about an unexplored region?"

Sunny smiled, then activated his communicator.

"I did. In fact, I have compiled a lengthy report about things I have seen, fought, and discovered there. Would you like to take a look? I can send it to you."

Teacher Julius looked down with embarrassment.

"A report? Oh, you shouldn't have... you must be so terribly busy right now..."

However, even while he was saying that, the old man was already opening the file. As soon as he started reading, his eyes widened, and a delighted smile appeared on his face.

"...brilliant! This is brilliant! Wait, what's that... you even remembered to include citations in the original runic? That's my boy! Marvelous! Huh... well-preserved ruins? A whole city?! Is there a... there is! Oh, my!"

It took Teacher Julius some time to skim through the report. Throughout the whole process, he continued to mumble under his nose in an increasingly excited tone. Some remarks Sunny understood, while some went completely over his head.

Like: "Greystone architecture... possible connections to the Third Wandering Archon?". Or: "Which era of the Babel Script would that correspond to?". Or: "Rats! That'll show that smug bastard Sando how wrong his Universal Origin of Rituals ramblings were!".

The old man's eyes gradually grew wider and wider.

Finally, he deactivated his communicator and looked at Sunny with an expression of profound exhilaration.

"You've... done exceptionally well, Sunny. Of course, your report is rough around the edges and needs a lot of work to be published, but this... this is going to make so many people happy! I can name at least a dozen theories that can be expanded, confirmed, or refuted thanks to all the new data you provided. And that's just off the top of my head! Not to mention all the good that will come from the detailed descriptions of so many new types of Nightmare Creatures you included."

Teacher Julius smiled proudly:

"You truly have a heart of an explorer, my boy! Very few people do, and out of those, even less have a keen mind such as yours. Not to mention the ability to venture into the deadly expanse of the Dream Realm and not only come back alive, but also remember to look at more than just what's in front of them. But it is thanks to such people that we can deepen our knowledge of the Spell."

He sighed.

"Most of the Awakened only know how to hack and slash. They tend to look at us with very little regard, but it is only because of us that they know how to hack and where to slash. Luckily, there are few bright minds here and there."

Sunny stared at his mentor with a bit of surprise. He had not expected such an intense reaction. He just wrote down his findings about the Forgotten Shore to please the old man, considering they shared a hobby.

"Uh... I'm sorry? Published? What do you mean by that, exactly?"

Teacher Julius glanced at him with a humorous spark in his eyes.

"Oh, don't worry. This old man is not going to rob his own student of the reward. I'll help you bring this paper to a proper state free of charge. I don't even need to be put down as a coauthor, although it would make me happy if you did. What do I need money for? I have more money than I could ever spend already..."

Sunny tilted his head, then blinked a couple of times. His heart was suddenly grasped by burning emotions.

"Excuse me, Teacher Julius. But. Did you... did you say something about money?"

The old man stared at him with confusion.

"Yes, I did. Isn't it why you have compiled this marvelous report? To receive the contribution points from the government?"

Sunny lingered for a bit, then slowly shook his head.

"No? I, uh... I just thought you would like to read it? I don't even know what these contribution points you mentioned are."

Teacher Julius looked at him for a while, then burst out laughing.

"Oh, oh my. What a good student I have! Ah, you really delighted me today, Sunny. Such pure dedication to the noble calling of an explorer! I wish more people were as selfless as you..."

'Selfless?! What do you mean selfless?! There's not a single selfless bone in my body... is there really money to be made from my stupid report?!'

The old man shook his head and said:

"The government rewards those who enrich the base of knowledge we have about the Spell, the Dream Realm, and the Nightmare Creatures quite generously. The more rare and more vital the information you submit is, the more contribution points you receive. These points can then be exchanged for a variety of useful things, or simply turned into credits. Considering that no one has ever explored the Forgotten Shore before, and how comprehensive your report is... I'd say you'll receive a pretty sizable sum. You really didn't know this?"

Sunny slowly shook his head.

"How... how sizable are we talking? Like if I want to rent an apartment... no, a house! If I want to rent a house in an area of the city with clean air, how many weeks would this reward buy?"

Teacher Julius gave him a strange look.

"Rent a house? What a strange example. Sunny, with how unique the data you contributed is, you don't need to rent a house. Wouldn't it be easier to just buy one? Uh, Sunny?!"

Sunny couldn't respond immediately, though.

He was in the process of falling out of his chair.

Chapter 372: Names of the Gods

After a while, he regained enough composure to continue the conversation.

Sunny and Teacher Julius chatted for a while, discussing the exact process of publishing the report, what changes would have to be made, and how they would work together to bring the project to fruition.

All of it, of course, was going to have to happen only after Sunny had settled in the Dream Realm and found a Citadel to anchor himself to. Right now, he did not exactly have time to work on an academic paper.

Teacher Julius also shared some of his knowledge about the human settlements in the Dream Realm and his views on how to decide on a proper Citadel. All his advice, however, could be described in one sentence:

"Find one with good plumbing."

Sunny wasn't sure what to make of it, but judging by the pained expression on the old man's face, it was indeed an important factor.

Finally, he managed to turn the conversation toward the things he really wanted to learn about.

"Speaking of that... I am really unclear on one thing. While exploring the Dark City, I found a few places of worship. However, the deities they worshipped seemed to be different from the ones I heard about in my First Nightmare. Did the native humans of the Dream Realm all have different gods?"

Teacher Julius looked at him and smiled.

"Ah! The gods. That is an interesting subject indeed."

He thought for a few moments, then said:

"Yes and no. The gods worshipped in different regions had different names, but from what we can tell, those names all described the same entities. The current consensus is that the "gods" of the Dream Realm were, in fact, actual beings, perhaps creatures of the Divine rank."

Sunny nodded.

"Really? Then... where are they now?"

The old man sighed.

"That is the strange thing about the gods. They are dead, just like everything else in the Dream Realm is dead. They seem to have been alive in the time periods of many of the Nightmares, but the ruins we have encountered and explored mostly describe them as being destroyed... by what or whom, we do not know. We also don't know if they existed before or after the Nightmare Spell itself appeared."

He lingered for a bit, then added.

"But we do know a few things about the gods. For example, how many of them there were..."

Sunny smiled.

"Let me guess... seven?"

Teacher Julius chuckled.

"You would think that, right? But no, there were only six gods. Their most common names were Sun, War, Beast, Storm, Heart, and Shadow. Although those names don't do them justice, truth be told"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Really? How so?"

His mentor rubbed his chin, then said doubtfully.

"Well, a god is too vast of a being to be described with one word. Take the Goddess of War... oh, yes, their gender seems to be very mercurial... the War God is supposed to be the deity of warfare, and in a sense, he — or she — is. But he is also the god of life."

'Uh... what?'

"How does it make any sense?"

The old man smiled.

"War is synonymous with struggle, and what is life if not a constant struggle for survival? So the Goddess of War can also be called the Goddess of Life. She is also the goddess of progress, technology, craft, intellect, and through all of this, the patron goddess of humanity."

Teacher Julius got engrossed in his favorite field and went on a small tangent:

"Or take the Beast God. He is also often described as the Goddess of the Moon, as well as hunting, carnal desire, blood, beauty, and the cycle of birth and death. The Sun God is also the Lord of Light, a manifestation of fire, passion, creation, and destruction. The Storm God is also the god of the depths, of the oceans, of darkness, stars, travel, guidance, and disaster. And so on..."

Sunny coughed.

"Uh... what about Shadow God?"

The eccentric instructor shrugged:

"Uh... I'm not too familiar with that one. As far as gods go, Shadow is not very prominent. Well, as a shadow should be, I guess. He is sometimes called the god of peace, death, solace, and mysteries. That's about it, I think."

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then asked carefully:

"I see. Hard to imagine that only six entities were responsible for all that. Were there perhaps any other divine beings?"

Teacher Julius thought for a few moments, then shrugged.

"There certainly were many beings that were either partially divine, or even almost as powerful as the gods themselves. We don't know much about them, though. Take daemons, for example..."

Sunny held his breath.

"Daemons were such mysterious creatures! They were described as having power almost equal to that of the gods, but of a different nature. They also seemed to have created themselves, or at least appeared out of nowhere. Almost nothing is known about them, except for the fact that there were seven of them... one more terrible than the other."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Terrible? Why were they terrible?"

The old man smiled:

"What can be more terrifying than a creature that came out of nowhere, wielding enough power to wage war against the heavens? Don't forget that what humans fear the most is the unknown. Perhaps the gods were much the same."

Sunny hesitated for a long time, then finally asked:

"Teacher Julius... have you ever heard about the Unknown?"

His mentor gave him a weird look, then laughed.

"What kind of a question is that? Haven't I dedicated my whole life to exploring the unknown? I think the lack of sleep is getting to you, my boy. Come, I have wasted enough of your time. A newly Awakened like you should be running around, trying to find patronage or ingratiate themselves

to a welcoming clan. I'll recommend you several books on the gods and divinity, to read once you have settled out there in the Dream Realm..."

Sunny smiled weakly, realizing that Teacher Julius did not know anything about the Weaver, the reasons for why the gods were dead, and the Unknown.

Strangely, he felt relieved.

Chapter 373: Reunited | Shadow Slave

Leaving the Sleeper Compound, Sunny felt as though even the winter cold could not keep him from feeling sleepy anymore. Wondering what time it was, he looked up out of habit and glanced at the sun.

The sun was all wrong.

Suddenly, Sunny was wide awake, his hand instinctively outstretched to summon the Midnight Shard. It took him a few moments to recognize his error.

'Oh. The sun is normal. It's just not the same as on the Forgotten Shore.'

He also didn't have to measure time by observing the sky anymore. He had a communicator that could show him what time of day it was, up to the exact nanosecond.

Shaking his head, Sunny headed back toward the hospital complex. He was late for a... a memorial. Of sorts.

The survivors of the Dreamer Army were supposed to gather today to celebrate those who remained alive and remember those who had fallen.

Entering the medical center, he headed toward the conference hall, but then lingered for a moment in front of a monitor attached to the wall. There, a hundred names were shown, listing everyone who had made it back.

And on the very top of it, there were three very special ones:

"Raised by Wolves"

"Nightingale"

"Song of the Fallen"

Effie, Kai, and Cassie...

Sunny stared at the three True Names for some time, then slowly lowered his gaze. Right beneath was his own name.

With a grim expression on his face, Sunny opened the doors and entered the hall.

The former Sleepers of the Forgotten Shore were all there, at least those who had awoken at the Academy or could make it there for the memorial. He looked around the crowd, searching for familiar faces.

It was strange to see all these people back in the real world. Especially without Nephis.

Now that they were out of danger and had lost their leader, there wasn't a lot to keep them together, and so much to split them apart. Before, they were united by necessity and the irresistible will of Changing Star. Now, nothing remained to prevent the old grievances from pulling them apart...

And yet, the hundred survivors seemed strangely united. Perhaps it was the shared trauma of their harrowing experience in the Dream Realm, or something else that Sunny couldn't quite understand, but there was no division between them. On the contrary, every Awakened gathered in the hall seemed to share an invisible bond with all the others.

'...Weird.'

Many people welcomed his arrival with warm greetings. Sunny smiled awkwardly and did his best to reciprocate their goodwill. After a few such encounters, he finally noticed Kai at the back of the crowd.

Sunny stumbled and stared at his friend for a couple of seconds.

'I'll be damned...'

How could that guy become even more gorgeous?

The Awakening made Kai's slender figure even more graceful, his perfect face even more handsome, and his electric green eyes even more mesmerizing. His luscious dark auburn hair was now neatly cut and styled,

his clothes were simple and exquisitely fashionable, and the several pieces of jewelry he wore somehow managed to enhance every one of those features by bringing it just the right amount of attention.

'Such... such injustice!'

With a resentful sigh, Sunny made his way through the crowd and approached his friend. Kai noticed him from afar, and then, the conference hall suddenly seemed to become much brighter due to his brilliant smile.

"Sunny! You are finally here!"

Sunny wanted to answer, but then froze for a second, noticing a stranger next to the charming young man. A sickly, terribly gaunt young woman was sitting in a wheelchair, staring at them with a tired expression.

There was clearly something defective about her body. She was unhealthily thin, with pale skin stretching over brittle bones and a strange twist to her spine. Her legs seemed lifeless and weak, tucked awkwardly on the step of her wheelchair. Her neck was clearly struggling to support the weight of her head.

...It was only when the young woman smiled mischievously did he finally recognize her.

"What's the matter, doofus? You've been struck dumb by my beauty?"

With a giggle, Effie spun her wheelchair, as though giving him the chance to take a good look.

'Effie... that's... that's Effie?'

Sunny stared at her for a couple of moments, trying to connect the image of the mighty huntress he knew — tall, strong, beautiful, and full of vigor — to this weak, gaunt young woman. He only spoke when the pain of the Flaw pierced his mind:

"Not really. What... what the hell happened to you?"

Effie smiled and shrugged.

"Nothing. That's how I've always been, in the real world."

Something moved in Sunny's memory. He remembered how the two of them sat on the support beam of the ruined cathedral, talking in whispers.

'...for some of us, the real world was more of a hell than the Dream Realm.'

That was what Effie had said, back then.

Noticing the strange expression on his face, she grinned.

"Ah, don't worry about it. At least now that I'm Awakened, I can move my hands. Look at this..."

She grabbed the handles of the wheels, then balanced her chair at an angle and spun it around again.

"See? Ain't that the coolest thing you've ever seen?"

Sunny hesitated for a bit, then said quietly:

"...Yes. One of the coolest, by far."

Effie gave him a smile, then glanced at Kai:

"See, Night? Your celebrity aura got nothing on my burning charisma."

The young man looked at her, but didn't say anything. Instead, he suddenly took a step forward and gave Sunny a big hug.

"Sunny! Thank gods you're alive!"

Sunny squirmed a little, but then surrendered to being embraced. With a resigned expression, he endured for as long as he could and then said through gritted teeth:

"Why shouldn't I be alive, fool? I wasn't the one whose unconscious, lanky body had to be dragged all the way to the Gateway!"

Kai squeezed him even tighter, then finally released his hold on him. Taking a step back, the charming young man hesitated for a couple of seconds and sighed.

"Still. With your luck, I am surprised that the whole Spire didn't just fall on your head."

Sunny froze, then forced out a smile.

"Yeah. That... would have been terrible, wouldn't it..."

Chapter 375: Separate Paths | Shadow Slave

Sunny smiled and leaned back on his chair, then looked at his friends with curiosity.

There was a question he really wanted to ask, but tried not to up until now.

"...What's your second Ability, anyway?"

His words hung in the air for a few moments. Suddenly, Kai coughed with embarrassment and looked away. After a couple of seconds, he said in a strange tone:

"I, uh... can see really far now, when I want to. Even when there's no light. I am also supposed to be able to see through illusions and all forms of obfuscation, whatever that means. And... uh... I can also see through objects.

Sunny and Effie stared at him and asked almost simultaneously:

"Like, through walls?"

"Like, through clothes?"

Kai hid behind his glass, lingered for a bit, and then answered in a small voice:

"...Yes. But I would never!"

While Sunny tried to imagine why would Kai refuse to look through walls, Effie laughed out loud.

"I see, I see. What a great Ability!"

She shook her head, then turned to Sunny and asked:

"Hey, doofus. I bet you often wanted to stab me with something sharp. Wanna try?"

He frowned in confusion, then raised an eyebrow.

"No. Why would I stab you?"

Effie looked at him with expectation clearly written on her face, then sighed in disappointment when he didn't move.

"Ah, that's a shame. I wanted to demonstrate my second Ability to you. Basically, it makes my whole body invulnerable. Well... comparatively, of course. Skin of steel, that sort of deal. A very sweet comprehensive defense boost, if I do say so myself!"

Sunny blinked and looked at the gaunt young woman with a bit of awe. Indeed, that was a very powerful Ability. Combined with Effie's previous one, it turned her into an exceedingly formidable presence on the battlefield. As if she had not been a real menace already...

Effie glanced at him and asked curiously:

"Well, what about you?"

He shifted slightly.

"A very neat type of conditional short-distance teleportation. Kai can see through walls, I can go through walls... while you can just plow through them, I guess. In your usual barbarous fashion..."

Effie grinned.

"Plowing, huh? Interesting choice of words. I wonder if..."

Sunny hurriedly changed the subject.

"So, uh... what are your plans, guys? What Citadels are you going to?"

His sudden question changed the mood of the conversation. For a while, a strange silence settled among them. All three had contemplative, wistful expressions on their faces.

This situation was inevitable, really, but they tried to avoid the discussion for as long as possible. Mostly because it was both slightly awkward and slightly sad. Back on the Forgotten Shore, the three of them had forged a bond, and now, depending on their choices, that bond would most likely either weaken or break. The future was going to lead each on their own path, perhaps in opposite directions.

For better or worse, they were about to go their separate ways. Perhaps fate would bring them together again, one day... or perhaps not.

After a while, Effie sighed.

"I don't know, really. I have received invitations from both clan Valor and clan Song, but... you know me. I don't do well with authority. Plus, none of them have moved a finger to help me when I really needed it. Only now that I am a hot commodity are they all suddenly kind and friendly. Rubs me the wrong way, to be honest."

She looked at her wheelchair, then slumped in it tiredly.

"Anyway... I might take them up on the offer, or I might not. It depends on what the fastest way to get ready for the Second Nightmare would be. Maybe I'll have a better chance of becoming a Master soon if I stay independent and don't have to compete against the actual heirs for resources and attention."

After the Second Nightmare, one's spiritual body became their physical body. Reaching the rank of a Master would free Effie from her terrible disability, so Sunny understood her motivation perfectly.

Now he knew why she had said that for her, striving to conquer the Second Nightmare was the only way.

...Funnily enough, through no wish of his own, Sunny had ended up in a similar situation.

Kai remained silent for a few moments. Then, he too sighed.

"As for me... my agency has secured me a very good position in Bastion. So I'll be going there soon. I won't have to fight another Nightmare Creature for a long, long time. I guess. Maybe even never."

For someone who was speaking about being safe and comfortable for the rest of his life, he didn't sound too happy. There was a note of reluctance in his voice. Even... shame.

Sunny frowned.

"You drop that tone immediately, Kai. There's nothing wrong with living like a person should, not having to worry about being eaten every goddamn day. Don't even think about feeling bad about it. Got it?"

The charming young man smiled sadly and nodded.

"I do. Please forgive my ungratefulness. But what about you, Sunny?"

Sunny scratched the back of his head, then shrugged.

"Well... I am rich now. You won't believe it, guys, but as it turns out, scribbling a few words about the things you see in the Dream Realm can actually earn you money. And! I think I can weasel my way into receiving a salary from the Academy as a research assistant, whatever that means. So, uh... actually, I haven't decided on a particular Citadel yet. But I can pick pretty much any of them, since the government is being very friendly."

Both Effie and Kai stared at him with incredulous expressions, clearly trying to imagine Sunny as an academic, or even an Instructor. Then, both shook their head simultaneously.

"Can't imagine."

"Yeah, sound wrong."

"About the Citadels, though..."

"So which one are you going to choose?"

He thought for a bit, then shrugged.

"Don't know yet. But I can tell you a secret... something that very few people know or think about. A very wise man told me to base my choice on it."

Sunny lingered for a moment, then said seriously:

"Plumbing! The secret to a happy life is to find a Citadel with great plumbing..."

Soon, it was time to say goodbye. Their parting was both warm and bittersweet. After seeing Kai and Effie off, Sunny lingered outside for a bit, and then returned to his room on one of the underground levels of the hospital complex.

It was already evening, and his eyes were full of sand. With an irritated snarl, Sunny took one of the stimulant patches out of the pack and plastered it on his skin.

Immediately, a cold fire flowed through his veins. His heart accelerated, and his mind cleared. Sunny felt refreshed, energized, and ready to chew on mountains.

Of course, there was a price to pay for such a boost. It would be inevitably followed by a debilitating crash of the same magnitude. Unless he used another stimulant, that is, and then another, and another. Only with each new one, the duration of the effect would shorten, and the strain on his body would increase.

If he was a mundane human, his heart would have probably exploded just from one of these unassuming patches. The government didn't joke around with its military tech.

...But he wasn't ready to make a decision just yet. He had to do a few more things.

Like finally checking on his new Memory...

Chapter 376: Broken Oath | Shadow Slave

Summoning the runes, he glanced at a particular cluster.

Memories: [Silver Bell], [Puppeteer's Shroud], [Midnight Shard], [Ordinary Rock], [Prowling Thorn], [Endless Spring], [Blood Blossom], [Dark Wing], [Moonlight Shard], [M... Un...old], [Weaver's Mask], [Broken Oath].

The last one, [Broken Oath], came from the twisted simulacrum of one of the seven ancient heroes of the Forgotten Shore, the Lord. Even though the coral golem had turned out to be just an Awakened Monster, Sunny had high hopes for this Memory.

But before he concentrated on it, Sunny stared at the rest of his arsenal.

'One, two, three...'

Twelve. After a year of constant battles and bloodshed, he only had twelve Memories. Of course, he would have had much more if not for the need to feed Saint. The taciturn creature demanded a vast amount of resources to get her to the two hundred shadow fragments, which was one of his goals.

If not for that, he would have made a real windfall. Sunny already considered himself wealthy thanks to the contribution points Teacher Julius was going to arrange for him. But if he had a dozen or two extra Memories to sell... well, he would have been not just wealthy, but extravagantly so!

Enough to buy several houses, if he wished to.

Maybe he still could sell some...

Looking at his trusty weapons and tools, Sunny hesitated.

Now that he could use Shadow Step to blink from one place to another, he didn't need to enhance his mobility that much. So, Prowling Thorn and Dark Wing were potential candidates to be auctioned off... maybe? They still had their uses, though.

The rest he couldn't even imagine selling, at least not before finding better alternatives. Even the Silver Bell, which wasn't really all that useful, but had something of a... sentimental value.

The little bell was the first Memory he had ever received, after all. And its description was, sort of... it touched something in his heart...

'Curses, I just used the stimulant. Why is my mind so scattered?'

With a frown, Sunny finally concentrated on his new Memory.

Memory: [Broken Oath].

Memory Rank: Awakened.

Memory Tier: I.

Memory Type: Charm.

His eyes widened slightly.

'Jackpot!'

Another charm... such luck! Excited, Sunny read further:

Memory Description: [They made a terrible oath to destroy the curse, or be consumed by it. Those who have broken the oath were consumed by the curse, and those consumed by the curse have broken their oath. In the end, none could escape their promise.]

'Huh... morbid. I guess... I guess that's how the carapace legion was born?'

He looked at the next string of runes:

Memory Enchantments: [Oathbreaker].

Enchantment Description: [The Broken Oath erodes souls of all those who approach it.]

Sunny held his breath for a few moments.

'A soul attack!'

Both the Nightmare Creatures and the Awakened had many ways to destroy their enemies. Kinetic damage — called physical for simplicity — was the most common, but there were many others. Among them, soul damage was the rarest and hardest to defend against.

It was no coincidence that Soul Reaper Jet, whose Aspect allowed her to strike directly at the soul, was so feared.

And now, Sunny had a soul attack of his own in the arsenal.

There was one problem, however...

'Wait... erodes souls of all who come near? Will it affect me then, as well?'

A deep scowl appeared on his face.

Sunny hesitated for a while, then sighed, and summoned the Memory into existence.

Soon, a glistening gem made out of polished crimson coral appeared in his hand. A second later, he suddenly shuddered and groaned.

As soon as the Broken Oath appeared, a sickening sensation permeated his entire being. It was as though someone was slowly draining the very life out of him... not only that, but he also felt weaker.

Looking down, Sunny saw his shadows ripple and react. The surly one stared at him with outrage and waved its hands in the air angrily, while the friendly one was hugging itself pitifully and pacing.

'Damnation...'

He had recognized the debilitating feeling that the gem produced. It was the same aura that had weakened him when he fought the coral golem. It was

also the infinitely weaker version of the annihilating soul attack of the artificial sun.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny dismissed the Broken Oath. Only when it disappeared completely could he breathe freely again.

"Crap..."

That was one serious side effect. How was he supposed to use his new charm if it would be slowly killing not only his enemies, but also Sunny himself? Drop it on the ground, use Shadow Step to blink away, and hope for the best?

Sunny sat quietly for a while, thinking. Then, a tentative smile appeared on his face.

'Wait... that should work, right?'

Turning away from the runes describing the soul-destroying gem, he concentrated on the description of his loyal Shadow Demon.

Shadow: [Marble Saint]

Shadow Rank: Awakened.

Shadow Class: Demon.

Shadow Attributes: [Battle Master], [Stalwart], [Spark of Divinity].

Shadow Abilities: [Weapon Sage], [Underworld Armament].

Shadow Fragments: [80/200]

Concentrating on the [Underworld Armament] Ability, Sunny read:

[Shadow Saint's armor can accommodate a charm Memory to inherit its enchantments.]

His smile widened.

'Good... that's the first part...'

Looking a bit higher, he found another string of runes:

Attribute: [Stalwart].

Attribute Description: [The Stone Saint is highly resistant to all forms of damage, as well as being fully immune to mind and soul attacks.]

Fully immune to mind and soul attacks...

'Yes!'

Sunny let out a satisfied sigh. The Broken Oath was pretty useless by itself, but when combined with Saint's special Ability and Attributes, it would make his Shadow even more lethal.

That was because Saint was a very special kind of demon. One whose will couldn't be intruded upon or shaken. Both her mind and her soul... well, the shadow that inhabited her body instead of a soul... were utterly indomitable.

He only had to make sure to not be anywhere near the living statue while she had the crimson gem set into her armor.

Tricky, but doable.

And speaking of armor...

He was not done exploring his Memories yet.

In fact, he had left the best for last.

Looking at the shimmering runes, Sunny concentrated on a particular string. One that looked broken and incomplete:

Memory: [M... Un...old].

Now that he was Awakened, he could finally restore the broken onyx armor he had bought from Stev for a measly handful of soul shards.

The Ascended suit of armor of the Sixth Tier — the most powerful Memory he owned.

Or seen, even...

Summoning the [M... Un...old], Sunny strained his muscles and, with some effort, managed to place it on the floor in front of him. Even now that he was an Awakened, the weight of the stone Memory was not something he could endure easily without using both of his shadows or wasting essence to enhance his strength.

Breathing a bit heavily, Sunny studied the damaged Memory.

The suit of ancient plate armor was jet black in color. Its design was intricate and solemn, radiating a feeling of dark resolve and stalwart, adamantine grace. Its glossy surface seemed to absorb and devour any light that fell on it. All parts of the armor were perfectly fitted to one another, creating an almost seamless barrier of impenetrable steel.

Well... not steel, yet. Stone.

The ancient armor looked extremely similar to the one Stone Saint had worn, and now that the Shadow was a demon, they were even more alike. The onyx armor in front of Sunny was still more impressive, though. More... regal. As if created for a being of a higher status.

And just like the armor worn by the Saint, it would only transform from actual stone into the miraculous stonelike alloy if risen from its passive state.

It couldn't be done yet, though, because its spellweave was damaged. To repair it, the self-restoring properties of the broken Memory had to be activated by an infusion of essence. Which no one back on the Forgotten Shore could do.

Now, however, things were different.

Now, Sunny was an Awakened. Not only could he control the flow of shadow essence inside his body, he even had the Soul Serpent to help him guide it.

Placing his hands on the cold surface of the onyx breastplate, Sunny closed his eyes...

And sent the essence into the onyx armor...

Chapter 377: Mantle of the Underworld

The shadow essence flowed through the coils of the Soul Serpent into his left hand, then surged into the cold black onyx. There was no resistance that Sunny had to overcome to transfer it from his body into the stone armor — after all, the armor was his Memory, and as such, could be considered to be a part of his soul.

The surge of energy rushed through the ancient armament, then returned to his body through his right hand. Soon, a stable cycle was established, with a constant current of shadow essence circulating through both Sunny himself and the onyx armor.

It was a strange feeling. As if there was an ethereal river flowing through him, moving endlessly in a circle. Thanks to the [Shadow Guide] Attribute of the Soul Serpent, its current was especially swift and powerful.

Soon, the onyx armor became saturated by shadow essence. As Sunny watched, it slowly began to change.

This was the fundamental trait of both Saint and her armaments, with which the Memory shared a common origin — both were made out of a strange living stone. When imbued with soul energy, the taciturn demon's body turned from stone to bizarre stonelike flesh, while her weapons turned to stonelike steel.

Sunny knew this because he had seen the remains of both the original Stone Saint and her fellow stone warrior after they had been defeated by the monstrous iron spiders. After being destroyed, the living statues had turned back into inanimate stone.

The Memory was transforming right in front of his eyes. Soon, its glossy black surface felt different to the touch. Colder, lighter, more resilient... closer to metal than stone.

The living armament had assumed its true form.

'And now, the most important part...'

Sunny gazed through the dark metal and peered at the ethereal weave hiding beneath it. The pattern of the diamond string was much more complex and vast than any that he had ever seen... with the exception of the Weaver's Mask.

But then, nothing could compare to that miraculous Memory.

There were six bright embers serving as anchors for the countless threads of light inside the onyx armor.

...However, the weave was damaged and chaotic. Thousands of strings were torn and disconnected from the rest of the pattern, breaking its flow and logic. Because of that, the armor couldn't repair itself before — it needed to be imbued with essence and turn from dead stone to enchanted metal for the self-repairing properties that all Memories possessed to come into effect.

And now, it was.

With an expression of wonder on his face, Sunny observed as the spellweave started to repair itself. The diamond string moved against the invisible winds that had been playing with them before. The torn ends turned whole again, the separated threads became connected to the rest of the pattern once more.

Thousands upon thousands of ethereal strings moved in unison, their motions full of strange symmetry and grace. Watching the beautiful weave restore itself filled Sunny with a deep feeling of satisfaction. He smiled.

'...This feels right.'

He continued to pour essence into the ancient armor and watched as it slowly returned to its intended state.

And then, it was finally whole once again.

With a content sigh, Sunny removed his hands from the breastplate of the onyx armor and retrieved the shadow essence back into his body. After the Memory turned back into stone, he dismissed it.

After that, not wasting any time, Sunny dove into the Soul Sea, walked to stand between the two Shadow Cores, and summoned the Memory down.

As soon as the silhouette of the ancient armor appeared from the sphere of light, he glanced at the runes surrounding it.

'Come on... be good... be great! I've waited for this moment for so long...'

He read the first string of runes:

Memory: [Mantle of the Underworld].

'Whoa... sounds awesome. But, Underworld? That word again.'

.

One of Saint's Abilities was called [Underworld Armament]. Her own runes also described the creator of the living statues as residing in the cavernous halls of a dark domain... as well as being the last child of the "unknown".

'Was... was Saint made by the ruler of the Underworld, or something?'

Sunny shivered slightly, then glanced at the intricate black armor with a solemn expression.

Well... if her creator was indeed one of the seven daemons and a sibling to Weaver, the Demon of Fate, then ruling the Underworld might not have been out of the question.

Shaking his head, Sunny returned to reading the runes.

Memory Rank: Ascended.

Memory Tier: VI.

Memory Type: Armor.

Memory Description: [Vowing to never look upon the Goddess of the Black Skies again, the prideful demon retreated into the darkness beneath an unassailable mountain chain. He wasn't the first to lead his army against the gods. However, he was the first to shed their blood, as well as learn the secrets of his own.]

'Huh... lead an army against the gods?'

When Teacher Julius mentioned that daemons had enough power to wage war against the heavens, Sunny had thought of it as a figure of speech. But maybe it was not? Perhaps a few of them had really tried.

And what was that about the secrets of the blood...

'Ah, endless questions, like always...'

Shaking his head again, Sunny turned away from the description and continued to read:

Memory Enchantments: [Living Stone], [Feather of Truth], [Stalwart], [Underworld Armament], [Prince of the Underworld].

Sunny stared at the long list of Enchantments for a while, his heart beating wildly in his chest.

.

'Can't be...'

[Living Stone] Attribute Description: "This armor can repair itself while being worn."

[Feather of Truth] Attribute Description: "The weight of this armor can be changed at will."

[Stalwar] Attribute Description: "This armor provides extremely high protection against physical attacks, high protection against elemental

attacks, and a moderate amount of protection against mind and soul attacks."

[Underworld Armament] Attribute Description: "This armor can accommodate a Charm Memory to inherit and enhance its enchantments."

[Prince of the Underworld] Attribute Description: "This armor grows stronger according to the amount of opponents its wielder defeats."

Vanquished Foes: [1213/6000].

Sunny remained silent for a while.

His dark room, which was situated deep underground, was silent for a long time.

After a while, he shifted slightly and said in a low voice:

"Well, I'll be damned..."

Chapter 378: A New Beginning

Sunny sat in the darkness for a while, thinking. At first, he wanted to immediately put on his new magnificent onyx armor, but then dismissed that idea. There would be time later... for now, he was too tired. The effects of the stimulant were slowly wearing off, and he had spent too much shadow essence already.

He did, however, note a few things about the Mantle of the Underworld.

The first fact he noticed was that it shared two enchantments with Saint. However, there were subtle, but important differences between the versions of [Stalwart] and [Underworld Armament] possessed by the onyx armor and the taciturn demon.

The Memory offered better protection against physical and elemental attacks, but lacked the complete immunity to mind and soul attacks, possessing a moderate amount of protection against those rare and fearsome types of damage instead. Overall, this was an advantageous trade-off, since most Nightmare Creatures relied on more common ways of destroying Awakened.

...Unless they didn't.

The more interesting difference, however, was hidden in the description of the [Underworld Armament]. While Saint's armor could accommodate a Charm Memory to inherit its enchantments, the Mantle of the Underworld could both inherit... and enhance them. Just one word made for so much difference. Sunny couldn't wait to explore this subtle trait of his new Memory.

[Living Stone] and [Feather of Truth], meanwhile, were pretty obvious. That didn't mean, however, that these enchantments did not have a lot to offer. He could already see many interesting ways to apply both in battle. The downside was that both were active enchantments, and as such, would

require a constant flow of essence to function. What's worse, the armor couldn't even be used without activating the first one.

But the most interesting enchantment was, without a doubt, [Prince of the Underworld].

'A growing Memory...'

Pondering about that strange and miraculous enchantment, Sunny couldn't help but think about the First Lord of the Bright Castle, who had supposedly been the first master of the Mantle of the Underworld.

What tier and Rank was the onyx armor when he had first found it? How many of the vanquished foes had been defeated by his hand? Was the Mantle of the Underworld one of the reasons for his legendary achievements?

For the longest time, Sunny had wondered about how an Ascended Memory of the Sixth Tier had ended up in the hands of humans in the Dark City. It had to have come from destroying a Fallen Terror... or so he had thought. Now, there were other possibilities.

But all these questions were doomed to be left unanswered. Sadly...

The First Lord and his companions had taken the answers with them to the grave.

Remembering the lonely cairn in the Hollow Mountains, Sunny sighed. Then, his thoughts wandered to something else.

'The Goddess of the Black Skies... Storm God?'

Teacher Julius had described Storm God as being the deity of the depths, of the oceans, of darkness, stars, travel, guidance, and disaster. He also said that the gender of the gods was subject to change. Stars, darkness, and storms were somewhat related to black skies...

Frowning, Sunny remembered the runes describing the Mantle of the Underworld. Indeed, "black skies" could also be translated as skies covered

by storm clouds, or the night sky.

'Interesting...'

Translating the runes reminded him of something. Opening his communicator, Sunny found a note he made during his conversation with Effie and Kai.

There, their True Names were written down in runic language.

'Nightingale...'

Kai's True Name was pretty simple to understand, but the Spell chose to interpret it rather creatively. Even though Sunny had no idea if the Dream Realm had actual nightingales, the runes described a pretty similar bird... probably. Translated literally, they meant Sings Beautifully from the Night Skies. Which could mean either Enchanting Siren of the Night, or simply a nocturnal bird.

'Huh...'

Effie's True Name was more straightforward, but also far more morbid. Raised by Wolves could mean just that, but a more direct translation had a different meaning.

Born from Wolves, or... Born from Being Eaten Alive.

Sunny shivered, then deactivated the communicator and closed his eyes for a second.

There was one more thing he could do...

Summoning the runes once again, he found the description of Weaver's Mask and read:

Memory Enchantments: [Mantle of Lies], [???], [Simple Trick].

Now that he was an Awakened, he could try to activate the mysterious enchantment marked by three question marks. Even if all of his essence

would be only enough to keep it working for a split second, he could.

...But he was reluctant to.

Sunny knew nothing about the enchantment, but from the boundless, inconceivable pattern of the mask's weave, he got a feeling that it was somehow connected to eyes, vision, and sight.

He suspected that the Vile Thieving Bird was a Cursed Devil — at least... and it had been driven mad by just one glance at the reflection in the Weaver's eye. Would something similar happen to him?

There were things, after all, that humans weren't meant to see.

Even gods struggled with looking at some truths, it seemed.

'...No. Not now.'

Sunny was somewhat willing to risk it, but doing so right now would have been really unwise. What if he passed out from shock? That would transport him to a random spot in the Dream Realm, and knowing his luck, that spot would be populated by horrors beyond imagination.

With a sigh, he dismissed the runes and took out another stimulant patch.

.

'Some other day... when I am much, much stronger.'

With that, he removed the old patch and put another one in its place.

'Time to put all I learned together and make the final decision. What should I choose? Stability or danger?'

Safer road... or an unknown path?

Two days later, Sunny was sitting on a bench opposite the entrance to the Academy hospital complex with a cup of bitter dark coffee in his hand. In his other hand, he was holding a slick communicator.

Taking a sip of the terrible drink, Sunny grimaced, then lingered for a few moments and sighed.

Finally, he pressed the call button to contact Master Jet.

She answered after a couple of seconds. Her voice sounded a little tense, and there were strange, barely audible whispers mixing with the background noise of the call.

"Ah! Awakened Sunless. What... wait, give me a second..."

Something crackled violently, and in the next moment, the background noise was gone.

"Much better. So... have you decided?"

Sunny took another sip of coffee and said:

"Yeah."

He hesitated for a bit, then added:

"As far as joining the Legacy clans or the government... I've decided against it. I don't know enough and have no leverage to ensure a good deal. Plus, that option will remain open for me in the future even if I stay independent for now. The reverse, however, won't necessarily be true. In any case, it's a serious matter, one that should not be decided upon in a span of just a few days, while suffering from sleep deprivation and stimulant abuse, to boot."

Master Jet turned on the video function of the call and smiled. The smile was bright and beautiful, but Sunny couldn't help but notice that right behind her, something was currently on fire.

"Makes sense. So then... which Citadel?"

That was the real question. While Sunny decided to remain independent for now, while leaving himself an opportunity to join a powerful faction later, his choice of an anchor was going to limit which factions he would be able to interact with later on.

He was silent for a bit, then said:

"Clan Valor territory."

Master Jet nodded.

"Solid choice. Bastion? Or a smaller Citadel?"

Sunny drank some more coffee, then spoke the name of the Citadel he had chosen into the communicator.

Jet's eyes widened slightly. She didn't say anything for a while, then asked with a bit of surprise in her voice:

"Are you... absolutely sure?"

He nodded.

"Yeah. I thought about it long and hard."

Master Jet stared at him with a slight frown for a few moments, then shrugged.

"Well, okay then. But, uh... that might take a couple of days to arrange. The place is too far north, and there's not a lot of Saints in those parts. But I'll find a way."

Sunny smiled.

"Thanks. I really owe you one."

She smiled in response and then winked at him.

"Be careful with what you say, Sunless. I might just take you up on the offer and come knocking on your door one day, asking for a favor."

He took a sip of coffee and shrugged.

"Sure. No problem. Oh... and call me Sunny, please. Everyone does."

Master Jet blinked a couple of times, then grinned.

"Alright."

Turning away from the camera, she quickly glanced at something beyond the screen, and then added:

"...Chained Isles, huh? Good luck, Sunny. I hear it's a real hell."

Chapter 379: Chained Isles | Shadow Slave

In the vast empty darkness, myriads of distant stars were shimmering with ethereal light. The vista of the night sky was boundless and stark, full of promise and mystery.

Above it was another sky. This one blue and bright, full of sunlight and gentle winds. White clouds flowed across it, telling enchanting stories with their movement and shapes.

Between the bright sky and the dark sky, an island floated in the air. It was surrounded by freely levitating pieces of rock and ancient masonry, its surface awash in the soft radiance of the sun, its underbelly veiled by impenetrable darkness.

Several gargantuan chains stretched away from the island, cracking thunderously as it slowly rose and fell.

The clangor of iron was almost loud enough to drown Sunny's voice... almost.

"...Argh! Drop dead, bastard! Damn you! Crap!"

Sunny had a good reason to be screaming bloody murder, because he was seconds away from being eaten alive.

Near the edge of the flying island, where the forest covering its surface made way for a narrow expanse of patchy grass, a massive wolf-like beast was currently trying to swallow him whole.

The Nightmare Creature was the size of a small truck, with fur as tough as steel wire and a long, terrifying muzzle. Its jaws were wide enough to bite a human in half, and strong enough to crush both bones and armor into dust.

Currently, those jaws were trying to close on Sunny, and the only thing preventing them from doing so were his hands — he held the upper jaw of

the beast with one, and the lower jaw with another, trying with all his strength to keep them open.

His muscles felt as though they were about to explode.

The abomination was also trying to bite down on the hateful human with all of its tremendous might, but for the moment, neither of them could overpower the other.

It was just a matter of time, though.

Sunny was burning through his essence to augment his physical strength, and those reserves were not endless. When the well of power ran dry, he would lose this contest.

'Not good...'

About two months had passed after he had chosen to come to this place, and now, Sunny was starting to seriously doubt his decision.

Why didn't he just go to Bastion? He would be safe and sound behind its walls right now. Maybe even in the embrace of a beautiful...

As though trying to add insult to injury, the Nightmare Creature interrupted his thought by letting out a deafening growl and doubling its efforts to devour him. Sunny felt a putrid wind brush past his face and grimaced miserably. The stench coming out of the beast's maw was unbearable.

'Just... don't faint...'

His hands trembled, and the terrible fangs of the beast came a few centimeters closer to sinking into his flesh. Sunny gritted his teeth, and then yelled:

"Saint! A little help here, dammit!"

But the taciturn demon was nowhere to be seen. She was a good couple hundred meters away, standing atop a low hill.

Sunny groaned and tried to push the jaws of the abomination away, but it was useless. The damn creature was just too strong...

.

A few seconds later, though, something hissed past his shoulders, and two menacing black arrows sunk into the feral eyes of the beast. They arrived almost simultaneously.

'Thanks!'

Using the momentary shudder that ran through the wolf's body, Sunny pushed the jaws sideways, allowed them to close with a loud crack, and poured as much essence as he could into a vicious throw.

The massive body of the Nightmare Creature flew for good ten meters and crashed into a trunk of an ancient oak, plowing straight through and turning it into splinters.

Sunny fell to his knees and drew in a shaky breath. Then, he quickly glanced back.

Far in the distance, a graceful dark silhouette was outlined against the bright sky. Saint held a powerful Memory bow in her hands, its limbs made out of horn and polished black wood. Two ruby eyes burned behind the visor of her helmet, and a crimson coral gem was set into the center of her obsidian breastplate.

'Nice shots...'

She wouldn't be able to help him any further, though, at least not for a dozen seconds. Sunny was pretty sure that the Shadow had spent all of her arrows while they were fighting with the pack, and now, she had to dismiss and summon them anew.

At least the leader of the monstrous wolves was now blind... probably. Not that it was going to stop the bastard.

The Nightmare Creature was already rising from the ground, howling furiously.

'Curse you...'

Panting, Sunny crawled a few steps and picked up the Midnight Shard. The austere tachi was as sharp and deadly as ever...

The problem was, that the last remaining abomination was clearly of the Fallen Rank, so the stalwart blade was having trouble breaking through its hide.

Still, Sunny had to work with what he had.

Making sure that the sun was behind him, he stood up and leaned on his sword, watching tiredly as the massive beast turned its ugly head and faced him.

The dreadful wolf lowered its muzzle to the ground, then growled with murderous rage. Bits of saliva flew from its maw and fell to the ground. Then, pushing with its mighty hind legs, the Nightmare Creature lunged at Sunny.

Covering the distance between them in an instance, the beast brought its terrible jaws on the tiny human once again... and bit on emptiness.

In the place where Sunny stood just a moment ago, there was now nothing but air, light... and shadows.

Appearing from the Nightmare Creature's own shadow, Sunny dove between its hind legs and thrust the Midnight Shard upward, aiming at the soft belly of the fearsome beast. The tachi pierced the pale skin without much problem and sunk into the flesh of the abomination.

As blood poured to the ground, the creature staggered and fell. A low whine escaped from its mouth.

Very soon, it was all over.

Falling onto the ground in complete exhaustion, Sunny tried to catch his breath and listened to the silence. Soon, he heard the sweet sound of the Spell whispering:

[You have slain a Fallen Monster, Dread Wolf.]

[...Your shadow grows stronger.]

Chapter 380: Above and Below

Sunny lay still for a while, then summoned the runes and looked at the dreadful number:

Shadow Fragments: [197/2000].

He sighed.

The task of pursuing power had turned out to be much more difficult than he had anticipated, and for one simple reason: after becoming an Awakened, he now received fewer fragments from killing Nightmare Creatures.

If before he could get two by slaying an Awakened Monster, now it was one. If before he could receive four by slaying a Fallen Monster, now it was two. What's worse, his hopes of growing strong by hunting down scores of Dormant creatures had been mercilessly crushed, because he didn't receive any fragments from killing those weaker than him at all.

Which was a real disappointment. Who didn't love punching down? Sunny was at the very bottom of the power structure for most of his life, so he had been really looking forward to having an opportunity to bully something weaker than him, for a change. Alas, it had turned out to be a waste of his time.

Of course, Sunny had also become tremendously more powerful. He could handle himself in a fight with Fallen Beasts, and even Monsters... especially with the help of Saint. That was the only reason why he had not fallen off behind Nephis, who was still alive somewhere in the Dream Realm, and growing more powerful with each day.

He had not managed to diminish the gap between them by a lot, but at least he was not worse off than at the start of this.

Thinking of Changing Star, Sunny looked into the distance. A somber expression appeared on his face.

'...Think about something else.'

There was only one bright side to all of this.

While Dormant creatures did not bring him any shadow fragments, they did bring him Memories. And those Memories could be fed to Saint.

Her own counter now showed:

Shadow Fragments: [157/200].

'Not bad...'

A low, eerie sound of giant iron links scraping against each other interrupted his thoughts. The island Sunny was currently on seemed to have entered the ascending phase, so his time here was running short.

Standing up with a sigh, Sunny summoned the Moonlight Shard and walked over to the corpse of the Dread Wolf. He had to retrieve the soul shards before it was too late.

The Chained Isles... the Chained Isles were a strange place.

Situated at the very north of the territories claimed by humans, they bordered the Hollow Mountains. That was one of the reasons why Sunny had chosen that region as his hunting grounds.

But it wasn't the only one...

The whole region consisted of numerous islands that somehow floated in the air, connected to each other by gargantuan iron chains. It was mostly unexplored, and the Awakened population here was not very large. Notably, there were not a lot of Masters and Saints here, especially those associated with the Legacy clans... be it great or lesser.

What the Chained Island had in abundance, instead, were the Nightmare Creatures of all kinds, from Dormant ones, to Awakened, Fallen, and terrifying Corrupted abominations. Each island had its own menagerie of horrors, and the level of threat differed from one to another. Most were

utterly deadly, though. Much more deadly than an average Awakened was supposed to be able to handle.

But Sunny was not an average Awakened. To him, this was a perfect hunting ground, a place where he could sharpen his blade without being seen by those who served the Sovereigns. Or at least he had thought that way, at the start... right now, he was starting to suspect that it was more of a place where he could die terribly without being seen by anyone who would have been able to help.

Just like Master Jet said, the Chained Islands were a hellish land.

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And not only because of the Nightmare Creatures. The place itself was capable of killing a person... or, rather, its sky could.

High above the floating island, there was the usual sky with the sun, the moon, and beautiful stars that shined brightly at night.

However, there was another sky in this strange land, the one that was below the islands. It was always dark, and the ethereal lights burning at an unimaginable distance in its vast expanse only looked like the stars. No one really knew what they were.

The only thing that humans knew was that the Sky Below was seemingly endless. On his first day on the Isles, Sunny had asked what was down there. The answer he received was simple:

"Nothing."

Descending into the Below was not immediately dangerous, but there was nothing there. Some crazy daredevil had once fought his way through the hunting grounds of Nightmare Creatures that dwelled beneath the islands and spent a whole week flying straight down. He had to turn back, eventually, because out there in the boundless darkness, his mind began to show signs of breaking apart. Even the winged Echo he used to descend into the Below had almost gone insane.

But other than being absolutely empty, the Sky Below did not seem to pose a threat.

...Flying above the Chained Isles, however, was rather deadly. The higher one went, the more crushing their weight would become, until they would either fall down, or their body would simply implode.

That was why every human on the Chained Isles knew to pay attention to the sound of rattling chains. Every island in the region went through cycles of ascending and descending, and as they rose too high, the pressure on their surface grew tremendously, to the point where it was impossible to move... or breathe.

Ideally, Sunny had to get off the ascending island before that happened.

He should not have been lingering to retrieve the soul shards from the corpses of the monstrous wolves he and Saint had killed, really. But...

His eyes glistened with avarice.

Soul shards meant money, and if there was one thing Sunny really enjoyed, it was making money. No amount was ever enough.

An independent Awakened like him had a lot of expenses...

'Fine. It's fine. I'll be off this thing in no time...'

He quickly cut the dead beasts apart and fished out the soul shards from inside their bodies. Hiding the beautiful crystals in his pack, Sunny hesitated for a little, then sent his essence flowing and tossed the first corpse off the edge of the island.

He was planning to come back here soon, and leaving so much meat lying around could make the future visit rather problematic.

...Sunny only had one more carcass to dispose of when he suddenly noticed a swift silhouette descending from the skies.

Commanding Saint to hide herself in the shadows, he summoned the Midnight Shard and looked up tensely.

'...What the hell?'

Surrounded by a halo of sunlight, a majestic griffin was quickly approaching the island. At first, Sunny assumed that it was a Nightmare Creature, but then noticed a human figure on the monster's back.

A human rider meant that the magnificent griffin was an Echo.

Sunny's face grew dim.

Very few people could have such an Echo on the Chained Isles. And out of those...

He was pretty sure that he knew the identity of the unwelcomed visitor.

Chapter 381: Roan of white Feather

The griffin folded its white wings and dove down, then opened them up near the ground to slow its fall. Sunny raised his hand to cover his eyes from the dust that was sent into the air by the powerful gust of wind.

'...Strong.'

The mighty beast shone with ethereal light and disintegrated into a rain of sparks, letting the rider land nimbly on the ground. He regained his balance swiftly and straightened, then turned to Sunny.

The man in front of him was tall and had broad, powerful shoulders. He was wearing a light armor crafted from the adamantine scales of an unknown monster, with a blue scarf wrapped carelessly around his neck. His hair was the color of straw, as was his manly beard.

The stranger's eyes were bright blue, and dangerously attentive.

Sunny stared at the man for a moment, then bowed respectfully, hiding his face in the process.

"Master Roan."

Indeed, the man in front of him was none other than Ascended Roan of the White Feather clan — one of the only three Masters on the Chained Isles.

Well... there were probably only three.

Unlike the Forgotten Shore, this region of the Dream Realm had several Gateways. Two were found, conquered, and turned into Citadels by humans. Both Sunny and Master Roan — as well as pretty much everyone else on the Chained Isles — belonged to one of them, the Sanctuary of Noctis. That Citadel was ruled by the White Feather clan, which was one of the vassal clans to the great clan Valor.

The second Citadel was rather mysterious. It was situated at the very edge of the region, near the dreaded Hollow Mountains, and belonged to Valor itself. Only those in direct service to the great clan were anchored at its Gateway, so Sunny had no idea what went on there, and how powerful the Awakened stationed at the Citadel were.

He did, however, know a bit about Master Roan.

The man was married to the only Saint on the Chained Isles, after all!

...Roan looked Sunny up and down, then gave him a friendly smile.

"Do we know each other?"

Sunny shook his head.

"No, sir, we haven't met before. I have just Awakened a couple of months ago, so... uh... I am new to the Chained Isles."

The strapping Master nodded and then glanced at the carcass of a Fallen wolf that Sunny had failed to throw over the edge of the island in time. When Roan turned to him again, there was a measured look in his piercing blue eyes.

"Did you kill that beast?"

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then nodded.

"Yeah. I... well, I can be very lucky, on occasion."

The tall man shook his head.

"This is a Fallen Beast... ah. You must be Sunless, then. From the Forgotten Shore."

Sunny smiled.

'Curses. He knows my name...'

He had nothing against the older man, but preferred to remain unknown and underestimated. Especially when dealing with Legacies.

"Yeah. That's me."

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Master Roan nodded, as though everything suddenly made sense, and then briefly looked at the sky.

"You should know that it is dangerous to remain on an ascending island, right? Why are you still here?"

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then shrugged.

"I was just about the leave and escape to the next one over when you appeared... sir."

The tall man sighed.

"Yeah, that's what I figured. You've spent all your luck on that beast, though, it seems. All three of the island connected to this one are also ascending. You wouldn't have been able to escape even if you left on time."

Sunny stared at him for a while, a sour expression appearing on his face.

'...Damn it.'

"Uh... what about that beautiful griffin of yours, sir? Surely, it can bring us both away to safety?"

Roan grinned.

"He is rather beautiful, ain't he? Well, not that it matters. In theory, we can dive below the islands and escape through the Sky Below, but believe me, you wouldn't want to meet the things that dwell on the dark side of the Isles. Even I prefer to avoid those things."

Sunny blinked.

"Then what do we do?"

The tall man laughed.

"I guess you're about to experience your first Crushing, Sunless. Don't worry, though! The chains of this island are on the shorter side, so it won't ascend too high... well, most likely. And I'll be here to bring you back to the Citadel if you pass out. Provided that we survive, of course."

'Great...'

This wasn't Sunny's first Crushing, actually. And that was exactly why he didn't want to experience it again.

But there was no other choice, it seemed.

With a sigh, he dismissed Saint, who had been hiding in the shadows all along, and took off his pack. Then Sunny found a soft-looking patch of grass and placed it on the ground. Behind him, Master Roan dismissed his scale armor and unwrapped his scarf, then tied it around his waist.

The less weight was on the human body during the Crushing, the easier it was to endure, and the more chances of survival there were. However, the Puppeteer's Shroud was made mostly out of soft fabric, so Sunny left it on. He also wanted to neither reveal nor dismiss the Soul Serpent.

As the giant chains groaned and rang thunderously, and the island rose higher and higher, the two of them lay on the grass and prepared to be crushed.

Master Roan stared at Sunny's slender physique, then at his own mighty muscles, and sighed with envy.

The Chained Isles was one of the very few places in the Dream Realm where being small and light was an advantage.

"...If you feel like passing out, turn your head to the side. Wouldn't want to suffocate on your own spit or vomit, right? Uh... sorry for being crass, kid."

Sunny grimaced and thanked the older man in a suppressed voice.

He was already feeling an invisible force pushing him into the ground.

'This... is going to suck.'

As if answering his thoughts, the invisible force suddenly grew stronger, crashing into him like a giant hammer.

Chapter 382: The Crushing | Shadow Slave

Laying on the soft grass, Sunny felt his body grow heavier, and heavier still. The island continued to rise into the sunlit sky, and with each minute, the crushing pressure became slightly more unbearable.

The ancient forest covering its surface bent, a rain of leaves falling to the ground. The mighty trees lowered their branches, almost as if trying to touch the ground. With a loud crack, a few weaker ones broke and plunged down, showering everything around with sharp splinters.

Sunny grimaced, feeling his whole body struggle under the strain. He could still move and breathe without too much trouble, at least... for now. Soon, the island would rise high enough to make any kind of movement almost impossible.

...And if he was especially unlucky, it would continue to ascend, eventually making it hard to even inhale. Hopefully, the chains would draw taut long before that.

The skies above the Chained Isles were beautiful, but also forbidden. Nothing could survive their crushing embrace — neither humans, nor Nightmare Creatures. Nor anything else...

Well, except for one thing.

Shifting his gaze, Sunny looked straight up and found the shape of the Ivory Tower drifting high above the world, wrapped in a veil of clouds.

The Ivory Tower was the only thing that seemed to be capable of withstanding the deadly pressure of the forbidden sky. It was a tall, magnificent pagoda built out of flawlessly white material that was neither stone nor wood. The island on which it stood was very small, barely wider than the base of the tower itself, and surrounded by drifting slabs of shattered marble.

Seven broken chains hung from the soil of the island, swaying as it moved.

The Ivory Tower was visible in the sky both during the day, bathed in sunlight, and at night, glowing beautifully with the reflected radiance of the moon. No one knew what the mysterious structure was and why it remained untouched by the obliterating force that destroyed everything else that dared to rise above the Chained Isles, since no one had ever managed to withstand the ever growing Crushing to get anywhere near it.

Many even believed it to be a mirage.

'Crap...'

The island on which Sunny had the misfortune of getting stuck had finally reached the highest point of its ascent and shook violently as the chains connecting it to other isles drew taut. The pressure at this height was torturous... but not deadly.

His bones were not breaking under the assault of the Crushing, and he could still breathe, even if with great effort.

It would have been better if Sunny could wrap the second shadow around his body, but he didn't want to appear too strong in front of Master Roan.

Speaking of the devil...

The mighty rider chose that exact moment to speak. His voice sounded a little strained:

"Hey, Sunless. Can you breathe alright?"

Sunny gritted his teeth and struggled to speak. In the end, all he could manage was an affirmative grunt.

"Good, good. This is actually not that rough, as far as Crushing goes. If we rose by another hundred meters, though, even I would be having a bad time."

'...Good to know.'

At this point, Sunny was regretting that they had not climbed on the griffin and dove into the Sky Below.

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The Chained Isles was a dangerous place, and the Nightmare Creatures living on them were fearsome and powerful beyond belief.

However, the creatures living under the islands were much, much worse. Sunny had seen them from afar a couple of times, and the mere memory of those horrors was enough to send a shudder running through his entire body.

Still, they could have fought their way through... probably...

It would have been better than this diabolical torture, for sure.

'Argh...'

But there was nothing he could do now except grit his teeth and endure. Minute after minute, hour after hour. Sunny couldn't even think properly because of how terrible the pressure of the boundless skies was. All he could do was suffer silently and stare at the Ivory Tower.

His shadow, on the other hand, was having a great time. It didn't move, reluctant to get noticed by Master Roan, but he could feel it stare at him gloatingly.

'Bastard... I'm going to wrap you around the Ordinary Rock and make it scream without rest for twenty-four hours straight... let's see who's going to be gloating then...'

The shadow hesitated for a bit, then awkwardly pretended to be interested in something else and looked away.

'Yeah, that's right...'

Somewhere in the forest, another tree exploded with a loud crack. Sunny tried to turn his head to look in that direction, but it demanded too much

effort. He didn't have to worry about being attacked by Nightmare Creatures in this helpless state, anyway. They were currently hiding in their lairs, enduring the Crushing the same way he was.

Who could fight under this hellish pressure?

Sunny felt as if there was a mountain on his chest. Every breath demanded his utmost effort to make. His whole being ached, and his vision had become blurry. Exhausted, he closed his eyes and circulated the shadow essence through the coils of the Soul Serpent to keep his slowly breaking body going.

'Damn it... I'll be late to wake up, won't I? When were they going to call... in the morning? Such an important call, and I'm about to miss it...'

He was starting to feel really hurt when the blessed sound of rattling chains finally reached his ears once again.

'Oh, thank gods...'

After about four hours, the island had finally begun to move again, entering its descent phase. Little by little, the crushing pressure began to grow weaker.

Master Roan sighed with relief by his side.

"The worst part is over. Just wait a little bit more, kid. You're almost there."

Sunny glanced at the older man and sighed. He used to hate it when people called him kid, but not anymore, at least not as much. He just felt a little wistful.

He didn't feel like a kid. Not for a long time now... not since coming back from the Forgotten Shore.

A dozen long and torturous minutes later, the island descended enough for them to move, and then slowly stand up.

The Crushing was over.

Chapter 383: Cowardly Researcher | Shadow Slave

Sunny slowly rolled on his stomach, then rose to his knees. He was breathing heavily, and his whole body felt as if it had just gone through a meat grinder. Master Roan, on the other hand, looked almost unperturbed.

The rider was already on his feet, tying the blue scarf around his neck with a relaxed expression on his face.

The forest around them let out an almost human sigh of relief. The ancient trees creaked and cracked, rising their branches back toward the sun. Those that had broken remained on the ground, adding to the nearly impenetrable layer of deadfall.

Sunny glanced at the older man with a bit of envy, then stood up and tried to shake off his exhaustion. After spending a few minutes resting and drinking greedily from the Endless Spring, he almost felt alive again. Glancing at the tall man, he asked:

"How are you able to fly up there on your griffin? I mean... no offense, but that seems like something only a crazy person would do."

Roan laughed.

"I don't rise too high unless I really have to. Usually, you can fly above the descending islands without experiencing too much pressure. After a while, you develop a sense of how much your body can handle, and for how long."

He massaged his broad shoulders and added, a note of pride in his voice.

"Plus, I am a Master, after all. I can withstand much more than an Awakened would. You did exceptionally well, however. To be honest, I was pretty sure that I would have to abandon my patrol to bring your bleeding body back to the Sanctuary at full speed, then throw it into the Gateway. I guess it's true what they say about you Forgotten Shore kids."

Sunny blinked a couple of times and asked cautiously:

"...What do they say?"

The older man smiled.

"Tough as nails, disturbingly indifferent to pain and fear, strong... almost scary. Scary children, that was the exact phrase I heard."

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then scoffed.

"Indifferent to pain and fear? What nonsense. I pride myself on being a coward — as one should. What's wrong with being a coward? Fear keeps people alive, while bravery gets them killed. As for pain, no thank you. I have been beaten, burned, crushed, drowned, cut, stabbed, pierced, bitten, chewed, and gutted enough times for several lifetimes already."

As Master Roan gave him a strange look, Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Uh... what?"

The tall man shook his head, then scratched his chin and said in a wondering tone:

"No, nothing. It's just... if that is true, Sunless... then what are you doing here on the Chaines Isles? Shouldn't you be having a nice time in a safe place like Bastion?"

Sunny looked away in embarrassment, then coughed.

"That... uh... there are several reasons for that, actually. Not the least of which is that..."

He looked side to side, then lowered his voice and said in a gravely serious tone: p□□∫□□(□)□□□

"...You won't believe it, but the government actually pays you money for writing down things about the Dream Realm. And since the Chained Isles are largely unexplored, they pay me premium for going around dusty ruins

here and scribbling down a thing or two. I am technically a contracted researcher, believe it or not!"

He grinned and watched as Master Roan stared at him with an incredulous expression. After a while, the older man said:

"You are a strange fellow, you know that?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Huh? Everyone knows that, I think. Anyway... don't tell anyone about what I've just said. I don't want the competition."

The tall man blinked a couple of times, then smiled:

"No problem. Do you need me to take you back to the Sanctuary? Or will you be fine returning on your own?"

Sunny thought for a bit, then said:

"I'll be fine. It's not that far, anyway. If I make haste, I'll be back before morning and go straight back to the real world. I have business to attend to there, actually."

Master Roan nodded and patted Sunny on the shoulder.

"Alright. Then I'll be on my way. It's been nice meeting you, Sunless. If you need anything in the future, don't hesitate to find me in the Sanctuary."

With that, he summoned his Echo. A sea of white sparks appeared out of thin air and swirled, slowly turning into the figure of the mighty griffin. The winged beast towered above Sunny like a gargantuan mix between a lion, an eagle, and a pure nightmare. Slowly, it lowered its head, staring at him with two beautiful, inhuman eyes.

Its beak looked about as fearsome and terrifying as that of a Spire Messenger.

Sunny tensed a little and took a couple of steps back, prepared to dissipate into the shadows at any moment.

He didn't really think that Master Roan would suddenly attack him, but being paranoid was better than being dead.

The tall man summoned his armor, then easily jumped on the griffin's back and raised a fist to bid Sunny farewell. In the next moment, the Echo stretched its wings and pushed itself off the ground, sending a squall of hurricane wind in all directions.

Sunny struggled to remain on his feet, and then looked as the griffin flew into the distance. Slowly, a friendly expression disappeared from his face.

'Well, what do you know...'

The famed Master had turned out to be a rather pleasant person. Granted, he was a Legacy by marriage, and not by birth... still, Sunny had expected to be treated with a lot more disdain and contempt, at best hidden behind a mask of false courtesy.

Come to think of it, the Saint governing the Chained Isles herself was pretty down to earth, if a bit cold. Not that Sunny had a lot of opportunities to interact with her after that first day when she had brought him to the Sanctuary.

With a sigh, he walked over to the carcass of the monstrous wolf and sent it flying over the edge of the island with a frustrated push.

The corpse of the abominable beast plummeted down and soon disappeared into the darkness of the Sky Below.

Making sure that nothing appeared from beneath the island to snatch it, Sunny lingered on the edge for a couple of minutes, then sighed...

And jumped into the bottomless abyss himself.

Chapter 384: Traversing the Islands

Falling through the boundless blue skies with the wind whistling in his ears, Sunny threw his hands to the sides and summoned the Dark Wing. As the translucent Memory weaved itself from light behind his back, he shifted his weight and allowed the air resistance to push him off course, effectively turning left.

A few seconds after that, he activated the enchantment of his cloak and slowed down his fall, simultaneously turning the downward momentum into a forward push.

In these past two months, Sunny had become somewhat proficient in navigating the sky.

Cutting a smooth arc in the air, he swiftly approached one of the gargantuan chains connecting the Forest Island to another, flew above it for a few minutes, and landed nimbly on one of the massive links.

The giant chain swayed lightly beneath his feet. Somewhere behind him, it rose and merged with the soil of the island. In front of him, there was a vast expanse of empty heavens. Here on the border to the Sky Below, it was currently twilight. The chain stretched into the distance, disappearing into the darkness of the void a few hundred meters away.

As the Dark Wing turned from a blur back into a transparent cloak, Sunny sighed and walked forward. Each link of the heavenly chain was as wide as a road, so he didn't need to be afraid of falling off. Approaching the connection between two links, Sunny either jumped down or glided up to the next one.

Walking across the length of the chain that was drawn between the bottomless abyss below and the boundless sky above, he soon left the light of the sun behind and entered into the eternal darkness of the Below. Here, there was no wind and no sound, only silence. If not for the swaying of the

chain, Sunny would have thought that he had entered a completely new world.

A myriad of ghostly lights were burning somewhere far below, pretending to be stars.

Making sure that no one was watching him, Sunny lingered for a few moments... and then dove into the iron surface of the chain. His body turned into an incorporeal shadow and merged with the darkness enshrouding it.

Here in the Sky Below, he was in his natural element, after all.

Sunny couldn't travel through the empty darkness itself, but the chains were covered by an impenetrable veil of shadows. He could swim through them for as long as he had essence to spare, safe from the terrible creatures that lived on the dark side of the Chained Isles.

Rushing forward with terrible speed, Sunny slid over the surface of the chain and flew through the darkness like a ghost. He went faster and then faster still, circling around the chain several times and leaving the Forest Island far behind.

Covering the distance to the next isle in mere minutes, he escaped from the shadows the moment the sunlight touched the iron chain once again and shot upward in a spin. The Dark Wing turned into a blur, pushing him even further up.

Sunny soared above the floating island and then glided smoothly to its surface, landing on solid ground with a light step.

This one was much different from the one where he had fought the monstrous wolves. Instead of a forest of twisted trees, the isle was covered by jagged rocks, with an ancient ruin standing lonesomely in its center. Sunny had explored the massive structure already, and wasn't interested in visiting it again.

Jumping from one shadow to another, he avoided the Nightmare Creatures populating the island and soon approached its other edge.

Technically, from here, he only needed to cross two more isles to reach the Sanctuary. However, one of those isles was home to a dreadful and utterly terrifying Corrupted Monster, so he was going to have to make a big detour.

Sunny looked at the sun, and then jumped off the edge once again.

Just like that, he traveled from one island to another for a few hours. When possible, Sunny turned into a shadow and rushed along the lengths of heavenly chains, then emerged from the darkness and traversed the islands themselves on foot.

Each island was different from another. Some were desolate and bleak, some covered by grass and vegetation. One was full of beautiful white flowers, while another hid a clear, tranquil lake. A few were covered by ash and flames, while several were covered by the ruins that some ancient civilization had left behind.

If there was one thing that united all of them, it was that each was dangerous in its own way.

The desolate islands were home to swarms of monstrous, gluttonous ants. The grass covered the maws of giant abominations that hid beneath, waiting for prey to step into their trap. The vegetation was predatory and deadly if one wasn't careful to not get too close. The beautiful white flowers could put a person to sleep from which they would never wake up. The tranquil lake was home to a creature so terrifying that Sunny did not even dare to approach its clear waters.

And these ones were on the safer side, as far as the Chained Isles went. Due to their proximity to the Sanctuary, they were well explored, and anything dangerous enough to pose threat to the Citadel had long been destroyed by Saint Tyris herself. Sunny had been to these islands already, too, so he knew his way around them.

Each was either descending or ascending. The former were easier to cross, while the latter forced him to walk while suffering from the early stages of the Crushing. If an island he wanted to use was too high, Sunny had to change his plan and seek out another way.

After a while, his reserve of shadow essence became dangerously low. Knowing that he will have to make a stop, Sunny chose a relatively safe island and headed toward it.

Gliding to the surface, Sunny tiredly dismissed the Dark Wing tiredly and looked around.

The island he was currently standing on was rather close to the Sanctuary, and usually empty of any Nightmare Creatures. However, it was wise to make sure.

Sending his shadows in different directions to scout for potential danger, Sunny sat on the ground and summoned the Endless Spring. When his thirst was satiated, he crossed his legs, put his hands on his knees, and closed his eyes, concentrating on the coils of the Soul Serpent.

With a part of his mind observing the world through the shadows and another concentrated on hastening the accumulation of shadow essence, he meditated for a while, and then suddenly opened his eyes.

One of the shadows had noticed something interesting.

Chapter 385: Iron Hand Island

The island Sunny was resting on was a strange one. It was rather large and covered in soft grass, with ancient stone columns protruding from the ground here and there. Most of them had long toppled and been shattered to pieces by some unknown disaster. The ground itself was full of depressions and generally uneven, as if it had served as a battlefield for giants once.

The reason why Sunny had come up with such a metaphor was not coincidental. The main feature of the island was situated at its center, and appeared to be a giant, rusty metal hand. Hence, the isle was unimaginatively called the Iron Hand Island.

It was well known to the Awakened anchored in the Sanctuary because very few Nightmare Creatures ever came here, and thus, many humans used it to rest during their journeys.

However, today, Sunny wasn't the only visitor to the peaceful island.

A rather ugly monstrosity lay dead in the shadow of the giant iron hand, its blood forming a large pool. It had a body like that of a snake, two powerful hands protruding from a human-like torso, a head with a long and toothy muzzle, and two leathery wings.

From the looks of it, the creature had landed on the island due to heavy injuries, and then succumbed to the most recent Crushing. Its body seemed broken and flattened, with sharp bone splinters protruding from the torn scales.

Sunny's interest was naturally piqued, because it wasn't every day that he stumbled on free soul shards. Additionally, and more intriguing, the shadow had noticed something glinting on the ground near one of the abomination's hands.

'Huh...'

Standing up, Sunny looked around, and then headed to the center of the island.

Soon, he reached the rusty metal arm and dove into the shadows, emerging on top of it. Standing a good ten meters above the ground, he stared at the carcass of the dead Nightmare Creature to make sure that the shadow didn't miss anything.

...Everything seemed to be fine.

With a shrug, Sunny jumped down and landed softly on the grass near the massive monster. Walking around it, he approached the spot where the abomination's hand lay on the ground, its five long fingers ending in terrifying claws.

"Gee. You were a scary one, weren't you?"

He didn't need to wonder about who had done the monster in. On the Chained Isles, Nightmare Creatures constantly fought each other. Winged ones like this one were often caught by the inhabitants of the dark side, torn to pieces, and devoured.

This one had been relatively lucky, all things considered.

Bending down, Sunny picked up the small object that seemed to have fallen out of the creature's hand and stared at it with a dubious expression.

"...A coin?"

Indeed, he was holding a heavy golden coin. Which didn't make any sense.

Nightmare Creatures were not exactly known for participating in commerce, and humans did not use coins. If they needed to trade, they either bartered with suitable items or used credits — of course, credits didn't exist in the Dream Realm, but the transaction would be honored when both parties returned to the real world.

So where could a gold coin come from?

Sunny stared at the coin for a while, then turned it around. There was a depiction of an archaic ship on one of its sides, with a tall mast that had an actual tree growing around it. A beautiful human face stared at him from the other side, a carefree smile on its lips.

The person had high cheekbones, long hair, and exquisite features. Sunny couldn't say if they were a man or a woman, just that they seem rather charming. There was a crescent moon drawn on their forehead, and... well, that was about it.

Sunny studied the coin some more, and then thought despondently:

'That thing is definitely cursed, right?'

It just had to be. What else was he supposed to think after finding a mysterious coin near the corpse of a monster that had died a violent death?

...But it didn't seem to be cursed.

Sunny had a rather good intuition about these things. He also had the sight of a person who had inherited a part of Weaver's forbidden lineage.

Looking under the surface of the coin, Sunny expected to see a malevolent spellweave, or at least something strange, but there was nothing.

From the looks of it, the coins... was just a coin.

The only strangeness about it was that it seemed a little bit warm to the touch.

"Huh..."

Teacher Julius would have been delighted if he brought him a sketch of a genuine Dream Realm coin. Cultural artifacts like this were few and far between. It wouldn't result in Sunny receiving any contribution points, but the old man was easy to please.

With a shrug, Sunny shoved the coin into his pack and turned to the dead monster.

"Let's see how many shards you're hiding, ugly lizard..."

He summoned the Moonlight Shard, enhanced it with two shadows, and cut into the tough hide of the Nightmare Creature. For a while, luck was on his side. He quickly retrieved two bright soul shards... so quickly, in fact, that Sunny grew sure that there had to be a third one inside the carcass.

"A demon, huh?"

That was where his luck ended. The body of the demon was too heavily damaged, so when he tried to fish out the third crystal, its stomach burst open and spilled its contents all over the ground.

"Argh! Curses!"

Sunny was so disgusted by the idea of being doused in the putrid slimy mass that he instinctively teleported a few meters away.

Then, he tilted his head and stared down.

Covered in repulsive, acidic liquid, three more coins — as well as something that resembled a piece of a wooden chest — lay in the quickly melting grass.

'Did this guy... try to eat a treasure chest?'

Sunny shook his head, walked around the disgusting mess, and quickly retrieved the last soul shard.

Since golden coins were rather useless to him and he already had one to sketch, he had no intention of retrieving the rest.

'No thank you...'

By that time, he had recovered enough shadow essence to return to the Sanctuary, so nothing was holding him on the island anymore.

Throwing one last look at the giant metal hand and wondering what terrible strike could have separated it from the rest of the theoretical giant, he

turned away and walked toward the edge of the island.

The sun was already setting, so he didn't have a lot of time left to return to the Citadel and use the Gateway before the morning came.

Chapter 386: Sanctuary of Noctis

Soon, Sunny was walking on the last chain he had to traverse as he approached the Sanctuary of Noctis.

By then, it was already night. Up above, the pale disk of the crescent moon shone softly, its light reflecting off the white walls of the Ivory Tower. Countless stars shimmered on the dark velvet tapestry of the night sky. Without the light pollution that the giant city where Sunny had grown up produced, they were beautiful and bright.

There had not been any stars on the Forgotten Shore, as well, so this sight was still new and breathtaking to him.

Now that it was night, the border between the Sky Above and the Sky Below was almost invisible. The empty void beneath the Isles had stars of its own, so it seemed like the reflection of the real sky during these hours. The only difference between them was that it lacked both the moon and the ethereal silhouette of a graceful white tower floating through the clouds.

The chain swayed lightly as Sunny walked. He felt reluctant to use Shadow Step this close to the Sanctuary and enjoyed the sight of the night sky, the smell of clean air, and the cool embrace of the wind. So he tended to complete this last part of the return journey on foot.

...Even hell could be beautiful, sometimes.

A few minutes later, Sunny heard the murmur of flowing water and knew that the Sanctuary was already close.

The Citadel that served most Awakened of the Chained Isles as the home was situated on a tiny island of its own. That island, however, was rather anomalous: unlike all others, it never rose and never fell, always remaining at a stable height, away from the torturous pressure of the Crushing.

There was a grass field, and in its center, massive menhirs stood in a perfect circle, which encompassed another, smaller one. This larger circle formed

the outer wall of the Citadel, while the smaller one formed the inner.

Inside the circle, there was a tranquil park with a pool of clear water in its middle. A path of stones led to a small island at the center of the pool, where, in the shade of an ancient tree, an altar cut from a solid piece of white marble stood.

The altar had three special things about it.

The first one was an obsidian knife that lay on its surface. The knife did not seem very special, with the exception of the fact that no one — not even Saints — was able to lift it even by a centimeter from the altar's surface.

The second special thing about the altar was that it appeared to be, itself, the Gateway. One simply had to touch it to be transported back to the real world. Once anchored to it, the Awakened would appear near the altar when they fell asleep in reality.

The third thing was that a seemingly endless stream of water flowed from the altar, feeding the pool that surrounded it. No one knew where the water came from or why the altar produced it, just that it was cold, sweet, and safe to drink.

Seven streams flowed out of the pool and eventually fell over the edges of the small island, turning into water dust in the wind. On a bright day, the whole Sanctuary was surrounded by rainbows.

It was the murmur of these waterfalls that Sunny had heard as he approached the Citadel.

Using the Dark Wing to glide upward and land on the soft grass of the island, he walked over to a stone post that stood nearby and rang the bronze bell that hung on it. This was to let the watchmen know that he was a human and not a Nightmare Creature that needed to be destroyed.

Soon, a whistle came out of the darkness, and Sunny walked forward on a path that led to the towering menhirs.

A few minutes later, he had walked between two massive stones and entered the Sanctuary of Noctis.

No one really knew who Noctis was, and why this place was called in their honor... if that name even belonged to a living creature. It was just what the Spell called this place, so humans followed suit.

In any case, the space between the two rings of menhirs had been made into a place for the Awakened to rest and recuperate between their ventures into the wild expanse of the Chained Isles. The White Feather clan had built walls to close the spaces between the standing stones, and recruited several people with useful utility Aspects to make living conditions better for those who chose to come here or were sent to this region by the Spell.

Currently, there were about two hundred Awakened populating the Sanctuary, which was enough to keep it functioning and safe.

This late at night, most people were either sleeping, resting, or had already returned to the real world, so Sunny did not meet anyone as he headed toward his assigned living quarters.

Like everybody else here, he was assigned a small room after becoming anchored to the Sanctuary. It was situated near one of two entrances, so he didn't have to walk for a long time.

Entering the room, Sunny quickly took off his pack and placed his trophies — a scattering of soul shards, a few weird-looking fruits, and the golden coin — into a chest standing near the bed. Then he threw the pack on the floor, lingered for a few moments, and left.

Usually, he would have stayed until the morning and went to either the kitchens or the improvised marketplace at the park to trade the shards for Memories or credits, chat with other Awakened to learn the latest news and important information about the Isles, or simply relax... but today, he had to hurry to the real world.

Entering the park, Sunny approached the deep pool of clear water and stepped onto the first stone of the path that led to the Altar Island.

Soon, he was standing in front of the white altar, surrounded by the tranquil sound of rustling leaves and running water. Glancing at the obsidian dagger, Sunny resisted the urge to try and lift it. He had already done so many times before, all with no result whatsoever.

'...Maybe one day.'

With a sigh, he took a step forward and placed his hand on the altar.

The marble felt cool to the touch.

In the next moment, the darkness of the night was momentarily illuminated by a flash of ethereal blue light. When it dissipated, there was no one standing under the branches of the ancient tree.

Sunny had left the Dream Realm and returned to the real world.

Chapter 387: Withered Flowers | Shadow Slave

Sunny opened his eyes in the cool cradle of the sleeping pod. The lid was already sliding away, and the lights in the room were gradually turning brighter. The panoramic wall in front of him opened to a view of one of the Academy parks.

The eastern horizon was already painted lilac by the rising sun, but the world was still shrouded in darkness.

'...Made it.'

With a sigh, he rose from the pod and lowered his feet to the cold floor.

These first moments after leaving the Dream Realm were still strange to him. It just... it just seemed weird to be able to escape it so easily, without having to fight through a sea of monsters and struggle against terror, desperation, and pain. How could something so meaningful be so simple?

And yet, it was. In the past two months, coming and going from the Dream Realm had almost become a routine for him. Not that he had done it as often as most Awakened did.

Standing up, Sunny grimaced, then massaged his shoulders and glanced at the sleeping pod darkly.

Now that he was an Awakened, the Academy had granted him a personal living space in one of the dormitories. These quarters were much the same as the room he had lived in during his preparations to enter the Dream Realm for the first time, but with one significant difference: there was a smaller room adjacent to the main one, housing a humble meditation space and an individual sleeping pod.

The problem was, that pod was not at all as advanced and state-of-the-art as the ones used for the Sleepers. It did its job fine as long as an Awakened remained in the Dream Realm for about eight to twelve hours, as most of

them did. However, Sunny was in the habit of spending much, much more time there.

His recent adventure, for example, had lasted three whole days... he had to work hard to not fall behind, after all. As a result, his muscles felt sore and heavy.

Circulating essence through his body to chase away the remnants of sleep, Sunny walked to the bathroom and got into the shower. As streams of water caressed his skin and flowed down the scales of the black serpent coiling around his lithe body, he sighed and closed his eyes for a moment.

At least his mind felt refreshed. Visiting the Dream Realm was not exactly equal to good sleep, but it was somewhat similar. Mental fatigue still accumulated little by little, but it was easy to remove by meditating or actually sleeping on the other side of the Gateway. Few Awakened ever did, however, since no place there was really completely safe.

Exiting the shower sometime later, Sunny finally felt wide awake and full of energy. He dressed himself, sat at the table, and quickly compiled a report about his recent exploration. Then, he picked up the communicator and checked its log.

No missed calls, a few messages from Effie with photos of all the delicious food she was eating and several memetic jokes of questionable nature, and a few more from Kai, describing his experiences in Bastion.

Sunny waited for a bit, then sighed and put the communicator down.

"Time for breakfast."

Commanding one of the shadows to wrap itself around his body so that he appeared like a normal person, Sunny left his room and headed out.

On the way to the cafeteria, he met a few other Awakened. No one paid him too much attention, though. In recent months, the images and True Names of Cassie, Kai, and especially Effie had been plastered all over the media, but luckily, he had avoided becoming a poster boy for the government's

insatiable propaganda machine. As the result, random strangers had no idea who he was, which suited Sunny just fine.

Entering the cafeteria, he got himself a full tray of food, sat at one of the tables, and placed the communicator on its surface.

The call was supposed to come any minute now.

He enjoyed a decadently delicious breakfast in peace and quiet, glancing at the communicator from time to time. No one bothered him, and there was no danger to be worried about.

A content smile found its way to his lips.

'Ah. Life is good...'

Finally, the communicator rang.

Sunny answered the call and listened to the respectful voice on the other side of it.

"Everything is ready? Wonderful. So, when can I... oh, really? Well... great! Then I will... be there at noon? Right. See you later, then."

Finishing the call, he put the communicator down and stared into the distance for a long time, a strange look on his face.

After receiving the contribution points for his Forgotten Shore report and making some money by selling soul shards to other Awakened on the Chained Isles, Sunny had done something that he had never thought that he would be able to do in this life.

...He had bought a home.

A nice, beautiful home in the district of the city with clean air and green lawns.

And now, after several long weeks of waiting, everything was finally ready for him to move in.

Looking down at his cantankerous shadow, Sunny lingered for a few moments, and then smiled.

"...I think we've made it, buddy. We really, really did."

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The person in charge of renovating his home and bringing it to the desired specifications was going to meet him there at noon, so Sunny had a few hours of free time to kill.

He wandered around the parks for a bit. Now that the spring had come, the air was warm and pleasant. The melodic drip-drop of melting snow disturbed the peaceful silence of the early morning, making Sunny feel balanced and relaxed. Even the shadow seemed to enjoy this tranquil landscape.

Eventually, he visited one of the kiosks scattered around the Academy and spent a bit of credits to buy a bouquet of fresh flowers.

Then, Sunny found himself standing in front of the hospital complex.

With a sigh, he lowered his head and walked through the automatic doors.

Using an elevator to reach one of the lowest levels, he passed several increasingly strict security checks and approached an unremarkable white door.

Inside, it was cool and dark.

Changing the withered flowers with fresh ones, he lingered for a bit, then sat on a chair that stood near the softly glowing sleeping pod.

Entombed within, a young woman with silver hair was dreaming soundly, her face pale and unmoving.

"...Hey, Nephis. How have you been?"

Chapter 388: Vigil | Shadow Slave

There was no one in the room besides the two of them. Well... Nephis wasn't really there, either. In a sense, Sunny was alone.

In more senses than one, really.

There were two small tables standing on both sides of the sleeping pod, each bearing a vase with fresh flowers. Sunny only ever changed flowers in one of the vases, while Cassie tended to the other. They had yet to bump into each other while visiting Neph after that first fateful day, though, which suited Sunny fine.

He didn't really want to see the blind girl now... or ever again.

Glancing at Changing Star, Sunny sighed and kept his mouth shut. He didn't know what kinds of recording equipment were installed in the room, so his one-sided conversations with Nephis had to happen in the safety of his mind.

'I've just returned from the Dream Realm. Spent a whole three days there, exploring ruins and hunting down a few Nightmare Creatures. My shadow fragments... well, you already know. I've been working hard to not let you leave me completely in the dust. Oh... I met a Master from the White Feather clan yesterday. He seems like a nice enough guy. You would have liked him, I think.'

He paused for a few moments and wondered if this was considered crazy behavior... talking to a person that wasn't really there, pretending that they were. Maybe it was. But despite how much Sunny hated to admit it, he wasn't as fine and stable as he pretended to be.

He was angry, guilt-ridden... and lonely. He missed Nephis much more than he had ever expected. Out there on the Forgotten Shore, she had somehow become a fundamental part of his life. It was strange to exist without her occupying a place in the same world as him.

...Painful.

He missed Cassie, too. Or rather, the version of her that had lived in his mind before everything they had turned to ashes. He missed their friendship, their camaraderie, their trust in each other... things that had been broken and lost.

Sunny sighed.

'You know, these days I often think about the time we spent in the Labyrinth. The three of us. It was a... a simpler time, don't you think? A wonderful time. It seemed so terrible back then, but now... now, I miss it a lot. I wonder if you do, too.'

He grimaced, then looked away.

'Anyway... what else? Oh. That house I bought is ready. Kai and Effie are doing fine. They are both very busy, though. I... hear that Cas is doing well, too. She had become the leader of those Forgotten Shore Awakened who remained independent. People are calling them the Fire Keepers. Funny, right?'

Sunny lingered for a while, gathering his thoughts.

'...I have visited your mom, by the way. I remember that you didn't like the thought of her being alone, so I went to see her. She is fine, too. Well... I mean, you know. For a Hollow. Oh, and the funniest part...'

He looked around, then thought:

"Do you remember how you told us that you wanted to dye your hair? You won't believe it, but I actually bought a little Memory that allows me to change the color of my hair at will. Not because of you, it's just something that I needed for a thing I'm about to do. Still, I think that it's sort of hilarious."

Nephis remained still and absent, her ivory face looking lifeless in the white glow of the sleeping pod. He gritted his teeth.

'...Where are you? How are you doing? Are you hurt? Are you fucking happy?! I imagine that you would be, free of everything, with nothing to do but slaughter Nightmare Creatures and battle against the thing you hate the most.'

Sunny looked down and clenched his fists, then remained still for a long time.

'Are you... coming back?'

There was no answer.

He sat by Changing Star's side for a while, staring at her still face. Then, he nodded heavily and stood up.

"Alright. Figures. I'll see you later, then."

With that, Sunny turned around and left.

Exiting the Academy, Sunny lingered for a bit, then turned around and looked back.

The massive red gates looked very different from how they used to, back when he and Nephis walked through them sixteen months ago. The space in front of them had been empty then, but now, it was filled with tens of thousands of burning candles.

These candles were an altar to Changing Star.

After the survivors of the Forgotten Shore had returned to the real world, their story spread like wildfire and captured humanity's attention for a few weeks. Both the independent media and the government propaganda machine added fuel to the fire, spinning it as an inspirational epic of human resilience, heroism... and sacrifice.

And Nephis, of course, was the protagonist of that epic.

Most of the Forgotten Shore Awakened were her willing apostles, after all. In their hearts, she was their savior. They were also under the impression that Changing Star had become trapped in the Dream Realm in order to give them a chance to escape.

Their voices fell into fertile soil. Nephis already had the established mythos of the Immortal Flame clan to raise her into the spotlight of glory, and with her extraordinary accomplishments on the Forgotten Shore, it only grew brighter. The thing that really elevated and exalted her, however, was something else. It was martyrdom.

People loved nothing more than a martyr.

Just like Sunny had said, a person had to die to become a true hero. Changing Star, however, had done something strange. She was now, somehow, neither dead nor alive, which only made the whole thing more gripping and emotional.

Nephis had become a martyr without actually dying.

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...Which was, coincidentally, very fitting, considering her clan's name.

All of humanity was now entranced by the story of the last daughter of the legendary Immortal Flame clan, the heiress to two most prominent warriors in human history, who had been thrust into hell, stormed the citadel of a Fallen Terror that ruled it, and fought the creature off long enough for a hundred Sleepers to escape back to the real world, staying behind to ensure their survival.

From the outside, she seemed like a paragon of humanity.

Sunny didn't know who came up with the idea of placing candles near the gates of the Academy, but it was rather ingenious. People seemed to believe that the Immortal Flame would not be extinguished as long as at least one candle continued to burn for Changing Star. So the Academy had

unexpectedly become a place of pilgrimage for thousands of humans who wished for her to do the impossible once again and return alive.

The idea was so poignant that even Sunny himself had felt compelled to light a candle a couple of times.

'...Zealots.'

With a dismissive shake of his head, he turned around and walked away, leaving the sea of candles behind.

None of them really knew Nephis. Only he did.

She didn't need their candles to escape the Dream Realm.

Perhaps it was the Dream Realm that needed help escaping from her.

Chapter 389: A Place to Call His Own

Sunny spent some time in a crowded carriage of a public train. Since personal transport vehicles were rare, expensive, and demanded a special government license to purchase, most people in the city used public transportation to move around. Magnetic trains, usually simply called trams, were the cheapest and most popular form of it.

During his time in the outskirts, Sunny rarely had a reason to use one, but when he did, people didn't pay him any attention. Sometimes they even went out of their way to not notice him.

But now, things seemed to have changed. Sunny had his eyes closed, observing the carriage through the shadow in case there was danger. There wasn't... however, he was surprised to notice that people, especially young women, threw curious glances at him from time to time.

'Huh... is the Soul Serpent showing?'

But no, his sleeves hid the coils of the Shadow completely.

'Strange. Must be the clothes, then.'

Sunny had not ventured out of the Academy a lot during the past two months, but on one of those expeditions, he had bought himself some unassuming, but pricey civilian clothes. According to Kai, they were "understated" and "stylish", whatever that meant. Sunny basically just went for the only comfortable thing the store had in dark colors.

He sighed.

'That just shows how shallow people are. A simple change of wardrobe, and suddenly, I'm at the center of attention. Why are girls so materialistic?'

...To be fair, many guys stared at him, too.

By the time Sunny reached his stop, he was a bit flustered. Leaving the crowded train behind, he sighed with relief, hid his hands in his pockets, and walked out of the familiar tram terminal.

The part of town he came to was somewhat near its center, as far removed from the outskirts as one could imagine. It was peaceful, quiet, and green.

The air was almost as fresh as that of the Dream Realm.

The houses in this district were also the opposite of the human hives Sunny was accustomed to — weirdly, they were all very low, no more than two or three stories high. The ground itself rose and fell in artificial tiers, each street existing on its own wide terrace. Out here, the snow was already gone, revealing beautiful lawns and greenery. The whole district looked like a garden.

Obviously, not everyone could allow themselves to live here. Most of the locals were either reasonably wealthy or worked for the government... however, as far as citizens went, they were not of the highest ranks. There were other, much more affluent districts in the city, and the real elites — as well as most Awakened — lived there.

But that was one of the things Sunny liked about this place. He could do without being around other Awakened all day, every day. Or anyone, really.

It took him around fifteen minutes to walk from the terminal to the desired address. Of course, Sunny could have reached it much faster by jumping through the shadows, but he preferred to not use his Abilities outside of the Dream Realm and the Academy. It made him feel more human.

Finally, he stopped in front of the home that was going to be his, and stared at it for a few minutes.

The house in front of him was two stories high, with grey walls and a slanting tile roof. It had a synthwood porch, a lawn, and a big window opening to the view of a spacious living room. There was even a garage for a PTV, and a hedge fence to separate it from the neighboring homes.

...It was like something out of a fairy-tale.

'Extravagant...'

"Ahem... Awakened Sunless? Sir?"

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Sunny was aware, of course, that a PTV had just parked nearby and that a man got out of it, approaching him from behind. He was just too consumed by the weight of the moment to show it.

Turning around, he glanced at the person who called out for him.

It was a short, overweighed man wearing a very expensive tailored suit and an antique luxury watch. Despite his outward appearance, the man was full of confidence and had a wide, polished, professional smile plastered to his face.

Sunny stared at him with a dubious expression, then said:

"...Lanard, right?"

The man — who was the representative of the agency responsible for outfitting Sunny's new home — nodded with enthusiasm.

"That's me. Ah, the fact that you have remembered my name is very flattering, sir. Really."

With that, he gestured to the home and smiled.

"How do you like it?"

Sunny hesitated, then feigned indifference and shrugged.

"It's fine, I guess."

Lanard lingered for a moment, then smiled even wider.

"Of course, a person of your caliber must be accustomed to much more luxurious accommodations. But I can assure you, you won't be disappointed by our work! This home might not be as high class as what you're used to, but we did everything per your specifications. Although... I must admit, your choice of location gave us a challenge, especially with the need to keep the exact nature of the modifications discrete."

Sunny kept a straight face and tried to understand what the hell Lanard was talking about, and who he thought Sunny was. To be honest, when he had decided to buy a home, he just contacted Master Jet, told her where he wanted the house to be located and a couple of things he hoped to fit inside, and instead of giving him advice on how to proceed, she simply arranged everything with a couple of phone call.

And now, here he was.

Meanwhile, Lanard glanced at him with a bit of curiosity, hesitated for a couple of moments, and then asked cautiously:

"By the way... if you don't mind me asking, sir... how does this beautiful house stack against your previous place of residence? I am interested from a purely professional standpoint, of course. Think of it as a client survey!"

Sunny looked at the cozy grey home, thought for a bit, and then answered honestly:

"Well... my previous place was about a hundred times bigger, built mostly out of natural stone and marble, with antique wooden furniture and a very special secret dungeon. Oh, and security was taken care of by a Fallen Devil."

Lanard stared at him for a while with the same wide smile.

His face, however, had slowly turned grey.

After a while, he coughed a couple of times and said hoarsely:

"Wonderful... that's wonderful...ahem. Shall we take a look inside?"

Chapter 390: My Castle | Shadow Slave

The interior of the home was tasteful and minimalist, governed by a design philosophy that seemed stylish, spacious... and a little bit empty.

The first floor contained a living room, a dining room, a kitchen, a pantry, a bathroom, and a guest bedroom. Everything was furnished and fully stocked, including a refrigerator that was stuffed with all kinds of expensive food.

Lanard looked around with a sense of pride and went on a long tirade about all the hidden security features the unassuming house actually possessed. There were thick plates of armored alloy hiding behind the siding panels, the wide windows were outfitted with titanium shutters that could come down at a moment's notice, and both air and water filters could withstand not only the usual environmental toxins, but also most known forms of biochemical threats.

Such extensive security measures might have seemed like overkill, but in fact, even mundane humans strived to turn their homes into compact fortresses. No one knew when the next Gate would open, and how close to them it would be. Even though most homeowners were never going to use these protective features, having them made for a big quality of life difference.

Lanard spent a weirdly long amount of time describing all the lighting fixtures his agency had installed, his voice bursting with enthusiasm. It seemed that the man had a thing about designer lamps. Sunny didn't have the heart to tell him that he would not be using any of them, most of the time. He could see perfectly well in the dark, after all.

"...the house is connected to the city electrical grid, but there's obviously an autonomous energy source for emergencies. Spelltech, of course. Power units are easily accessible for purchase and last for a very long time..."

By spelltech, he meant that the autonomous generator was built by combining modern technology with Awakened powers. The power units it required had to be either recharged or created by someone with a suitable Utility Aspect. Devices such as this were considered to be a luxury for the commoners, but in fact, a very large part of the city's infrastructure functioned on spelltech.

Not everything in the world was created by the Awakened, but almost all industries required their participation in one way or another. Even the air filtration systems Sunny's mother used to assemble in an underground factory on the outskirts contained fiber grown by one of the Nightmare Spell carriers.

That was why, while Utility Aspects were often useless in a fight, people who possessed them were so valued by society.

...Sunny asked a couple of questions about the entertainment system built into the living room, scratched the back of his head after receiving the answers, and expressed his desire to see the second floor.

The second floor contained the master bedroom and two smaller ones, each with its own bathroom, and a brightly lit home office. There was also the latch to the storage space in the attic. Lanard described a few things about the furniture they chose, and then mentioned the soundproofing of the master bedroom several times, for some unknown reason.

Sunny frowned and gave him a strange look.

'I mean... sleeping in peace and quiet is nice, but he does know that I can't sleep in the real world, right? What a strange man...'

Finally, they descended into the basement, which was situated deep underground, as well as being the most heavily fortified and well-protected part of the house. In a sense, this was the heart of the unassuming grey home.

The whole basement was one large space, with walls, floor, and ceiling covered by heavy plates of armored ceramic alloy. This was done so that an

Awakened could train here without worrying about destroying their own home or alerting the neighbors.

Sunny paid extra to make sure that every piece of training equipment here could survive his spars with Saint. He still remembered and mourned all the beautiful things he had lost during their previous duels. Like his favorite table... or his comfortable chair... or his pride...

The basement could be isolated from the rest of the house and from the outside world, turning into a heavily fortified, impenetrable alloy box. The reason for this level of additional security stood in a small alcove at the far end of it.

It was a state-of-the-art, beautiful, incredibly expensive sleeping pod — the best money could buy. Sunny walked over to it and stared at the softly illuminated, luxurious cradle for a while, then smiled.

'No more sore muscles...'

In its closed state, the pod looked like a steel monolith. As far as high-tech coffins went, this armored one was a real beauty. Sunny couldn't even call it a coffin, really. That thing... that thing was a whole sarcophagus.

With its help, he would be able to spend entire months in the Dream Realm without subjecting his physical body to any damage. He wasn't planning on getting lost in the Spell for so long, of course, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Lanard chuckled:

"I am not going to lie, every time I find myself in such an environment, I can't help but feel a little scared. Have you ever heard about Dracula, sir?"

Sunny glanced at him, then shrugged.

"Not really. What is that?"

The short man shivered.

"Just a legend, thankfully. Dracula was a fiend that fed on human blood and slept in a coffin underground. Hence the..."

Sunny smiled:

"Oh, a vampire? Yes, I've met one or two."

Lanard grew pale, remained silent for a while, then squeaked:

"M—m... met?"

Not paying him any attention, Sunny turned to the second pod that stood near the first one.

This device looked similar enough to a sleeping pod to be mistaken for one, but had nothing to do with sleeping. Well... not technically.

It also had a cradle and a heavy lid, but unlike Sunny's new sarcophagus, it wasn't designed to accommodate a human body for long periods of time. In fact, there was a plaque on the inside of the lid advising people against overusing the equipment and asking them to behave responsibly.

It was the best available Dreamscape pod, allowing one to enter the advanced virtual reality simulation that existed on the edge between technology and magic.

...Sunny had big plans for that thing.

Chapter 391: Dreamscape | Shadow Slave

Dreamscape was a place that was neither real nor a part of the Dream Realm, but instead existed somewhere in between. It was created and maintained by a combination of advanced modern technology and a very special Aspect Ability that a certain Master — now already a Saint — possessed. Their power had to do with illusions, and so, that was what Dreamscape was.

A massive illusion that countless people could share.

However, that illusion was not entirely malleable, and functioned according to a set of absolute rules. It reflected reality instead of being a complete replacement for it. As the result, a person entering it was bound by the same laws that existed in the real world.

And since one of those laws was the Nightmare Spell, a person's Aspect, Abilities, Memories, and Echoes would function in the illusion the same way they functioned outside of it, with one important difference. One couldn't be hurt, wounded, or killed in the Dreamscape. Neither Memories nor Echoes could be destroyed.

Which meant that Awakened were able to battle each other there without having to risk their lives and keep the destructive force of their duels out of the real world. This application was the primary use of the Dreamscape... well, in a sense.

At the dawn of it, the Dreamscape was mostly used by the Legacy Clans and the government to train elite Awakened that served them, but it was quickly deemed as only being marginally useful. While such training could facilitate safe duels between the human carriers of the Spell, its simulation of the Nightmare Creatures was not that close to reality. The illusory monsters lacked the will and mind of actual abominations, after all.

So, the Dreamscape had failed to become a successful training tool and was thus largely abandoned.

It had, however, unexpectedly found incredible success in the entertainment segment.

Those Awakened that were not part of elite strike forces deemed it to be very engaging, useful... and fun. The duels in the Dreamscape became very popular, and that popularity simply exploded once the company behind it came up with the idea to integrate a broadcast function into the simulation pods, thus making these duels available to a much broader audience — the mundane humans.

Today, Dreamscape was a whole industry with both amateur and professional leagues, famous celebrities, and passionate fan clubs. There was even a version of it for non-Awakened, with its own set of environments and adventures that allowed people to experience a facsimile of what it meant to travel across the Dream Realm while battling Nightmare Creatures.

Sunny, however, wasn't interested in the fame, glory, and money that becoming a renowned Dreamscape champion could bring him. No matter how lucrative, it was just a toy, at the end of the day.

He was, nevertheless, extremely interested in that toy for three very important reasons.

The first reason was the anonymity that Dreamscape offered. It was all but impossible to track a person entering the illusion if they didn't wish to be tracked, which was very much to his liking.

The second reason was Shadow Dance. Sunny needed to fight against a multitude of opponents skilled in wielding different weapons and using various styles to sharpen his battle art and make it — as well as the Soul Serpent — stronger. In a sense, he needed to create a library of mirrored styles to enrich his own.

Was there a better place to find thousands upon thousands of Awakened who were willing and ready to cross blades with him? All without having to risk his life, to boot.

The third reason was rather unexpected. In fact, Sunny had stumbled upon it by pure accident.

Back when he had just arrived on the Chained Isles, he secretly tested the Mantle of the Underworld in battles against several Nightmare Creatures. The onyx armor had turned out to be even more remarkable than he had anticipated, so he easily hunted down several abominations. And yet, one creature had managed to escape from him after being thoroughly defeated, mostly because of the approaching Crushing.

That was when he discovered how the [Prince of the Underworld] enchantment really worked. Its description said that the onyx armor grew stronger according to the number of opponents its wielder defeated... and it did exactly that. The enchantment didn't care whether the opponent lived or died, all that mattered to it was that the enemy lost.

After the Nightmare Creature Sunny had beaten escaped, the counter of the enchantment still changed from [1215/6000] to [1216/6000].

He tested it in a battle with another abomination, bringing it to the door of death and then walking away without delivering the last blow. The counter went to [1217/6000].

So, Sunny hoped to kill two birds with one stone in the Dreamscape — to both elevate his technique and satiate the requirements of the [Prince of the Underworld] with a constant stream of victories.

Now that he had finally bought his own home and gained access to a sufficiently secure simulation pod, the chance to do so was finally in his grasp.

...But first, he needed to send Lanard away.

The two of them returned to the ground floor. The short man looked around and asked with a somewhat forced smile:

"I... I hope that everything was to your liking, sir?"

Trying not to show how weird it was for him to be addressed as "sir", still, Sunny gave him a curt nod and answered evenly:

"Yes. It will do."

Lanard hesitated for a few moments, then said:

"Good. Great! Ahem... would you like to subscribe to our active security service? Many Awakened find it beneficial to have a dedicated security... team... guarding... uh..."

The short man started to give him an obviously practiced sales pitch, but under Sunny's indifferent gaze, his voice grew quieter and quieter, until eventually disappearing completely.

Sunny smiled slightly.

"I would not, Lanard. Do you really presume to be able to guard... me?"

Lanard gulped, then shook his head.

"Ha! Ha-ha. No, of course not. What I was thinking about, even? Please forgive me, sir."

He looked away, then hurried to change the subject:

"In any case, as you can see, the interior is rather empty. We left space for your to fit your... ahem... things. If you don't mind me asking, when are the movers arriving?"

Sunny stared at him, then shrugged.

"They're not. I don't own a lot of... things."

By which he meant that the clothes on his back and the stuff in his pockets were the total sum of his worldly possessions.

Lanard sighed, then nodded:

"How profound. Indeed, people these days are too preoccupied with material possessions. They define themselves through the ownership of things, not noticing that those things actually own them. I envy your wisdom, sir."

'...What on earth is that guy going on about?'

Sunny stared at Lanard's tailored suit and antique watch with hidden envy. Those had to be expensive...

The short man caught the direction of his gaze, and blushed with embarrassment.

"Anyway! If no one is coming, then we can conclude the deal right here and now. I wouldn't want to... take too much of your precious time!"

They signed a few documents. All payments had been made in advance, so this was just a formality... but, despite that, completing this meaningless ritual made Sunny feel a deep and powerful emotion.

In a few minutes, Lanard was gone, leaving him alone in his new home.

The first home he had in many, many years.

Chapter 392: Birth of a Legend

For a while, Sunny stood motionlessly in the living room. Then, he slowly wandered around the house, looking at its walls and tastefully furnished rooms. Finally, he found himself near the refrigerator and took out a glass bottle full of clear, pure water.

With it in hand, Sunny walked outside and sat down on the porch.

The terrace district was quiet and peaceful. The air was still cold, but the sunlight was already full of warmth, promising a vibrant spring. The wind rustled the leaves gently, and streams of meltwater murmured softly as they ran down the pavement. Sunny stared at the piece of land that he now owned and opened the glass bottle.

He spent quite a while there, sipping water and looking at nothing in particular. As hours passed, several PTVs drove by. He saw a few people in clean and warm clothes. A bit later, droves of children and teenagers in school uniforms walked past, on their way home from their studies.

After that, he sighed, retrieved his shadows, and went back inside.

Bringing the empty bottle back to the refrigerator, he stared at it for a few moments.

Inside, there was food... so much food. Enough food to last him for a month. All easily accessible, delicious, and well within his means.

...Before Sunny knew it, his fist slammed into the door of the refrigerator, easily piercing the thin metal sheets and turning the vegetables stored on the other side into vapor. Pieces of metal and plastic flew in the air, and the whole house trembled slightly. The refrigerator itself cracked and deformed, nearly bursting apart from the force of the impact.

Sunny stared at his hand in shock, then awkwardly retrieved it from inside the devastating device and looked at the broken thing with dismay.

"...Crap!"

Now he was going to have to buy a new one. And replace all the food. And clean up all the mess...

'What the hell is wrong with me?'

Shaking his head, he put the empty glass bottle on the counter, sighed, and went to find a mop.

Some time later, Sunny returned to the basement and approached the Dreamscape pod. He looked at it for a while, then turned around and paced around the armored dojo, frowning.

'Come on now... you've been preparing for this for a long, long time.'

As he paced, his whole presence slowly changed. The way Sunny walked, the way he held himself, the way his hands moved all became slightly different.

"There are six gods. The War God, also known as the God of Life. The Beast God, also known as the Goddess of the Moon. The Sun God..."

As he recited the names of the gods and their various aspects, the manner in which he spoke also changed. The difference was subtle, but noticeable.

One after another, Sunny changed every little bit of behavioral traits that could be traced back to him. He had spent a lot of time training for this moment, using the physical malleability of a Shadow Dance practitioner to make himself unrecognizable. Surprisingly, the task had turned out much easier than he had thought. It was basically his specialty, anyway.

Weaver's Mask could protect his identity from all who would wish to learn it through magic, but he had to deal with mundane forms of identification on his own.

After a while, when he was ready, Sunny undressed, approached the simulation pod, and climbed into its cradle. As the polished mask of black wood appeared on his face, the lid closed.

A string of shimmering letters appeared in front of him.

"Enter Dreamscape?"

"Yes" "No"

He sighed, then concentrated on the "Yes".

A few moments later, his vision darkened.

Sunny found himself standing in a boundless, black void. All around him, countless stars burned with ethereal light, an inconceivably complex weave of strings connecting them together.

...There was, however, no logic or sense in the pattern. He didn't feel any meaning hidden in the beautiful weave of the strings of light. It was just a pretty backdrop, and nothing more.

A fake.

Other than that, though, the simulation was pretty realistic. He looked down and saw his naked body, the Soul Serpent coiling around his arms and torso. The Dreamscape recreated his appearance to the sma... uh... in great detail.

'...Huh.'

Shaking his head in bewilderment, Sunny summoned the Mantle of the Underworld. It weaved itself from black threads and covered his body. As soon as it did, a pleasant voice resounded in the darkness.

"Challenger! Welcome to the Dreamscape."

Sunny summoned the Autumn Leaf — a small charm that allowed him to change the color of his hair. After a short hesitation, he made them appear white.

'What next? How do I fight people?'

The pleasant voice promptly responded:

"Before proceeding further, please choose an alias."

He blinked a couple of times, then scratched a back of his head.

'Oh, right. An alias...'

After some thought, Sunny remembered the legend of Odysseus that Neph like to talk about, and smiled.

"Nobody."

That would be a good alias... he could already imagine how funny it would be, to hear something like "Nobody has defeated the enemy!" or "Nobody has won!".

His thoughts, however, were interrupted by the voice of the Dreamscape:

"Alias "Nobody" is taken. Please choose another."

"Uh..."

He did not expect that. What would be a better...

"Alias "Uh" is taken. Please choose another."

"What? No, wait!"

"Alias "What? No, wait!" is taken. Please choose another."

Sunny shut his mouth, then thought for a while.

His alias had to not only sound nice, but also be the opposite of what he would ever call himself in real life. Just like his movement and speech patterns, it had to be a part of the disguise. That's why coming up with one was not that easy...

In the next few minutes, he tried a dozen different aliases, all to the same result. The level of coolness of the aliases he could come up with rapidly dropped, while the level of his irritation quickly rose. He felt as if the damned simulation was mocking him.

Finally, Sunny growled in frustration and said the first word that came to his mind:

"...Mongrel!"

The Dreamscape was silent for a while. Then, it said:

"Welcome, Mongrel. Please, choose a dream of your liking."

'Really?! Mongrel?! Well... mission accomplished, I guess! This is indeed the last thing I would want to be known as!'

Oh, the irony...

As Sunny huffed and puffed from frustration, several images appeared in front of him. All contained depictions of different environments, although most looked like an arena of some sorts.

From his research, Sunny knew that the choice of an arena decided what type of opponents he would get to fight against. Some were available to everyone, some required a certain number of victories to be accessed. Professional duelists all spent their time in those elite dreams.

'Dreams... what a stupid name. If I was dreaming, I would be on the Chained Islands right now, wouldn't I?'

His body was, indeed, awake right now. It's just that his mind was inside of an illusion.

Regardless, what he needed was a place where he could fight sufficiently skilled amateurs without drawing too much attention. He knew just the place.

Pointing at one of the images, Sunny said.

"There."

A moment later, the black void disappeared, and he was suddenly somewhere else.

A loud voice thundered from somewhere above:

"Challenger Mongrel has entered the Colosseum!"

Chapter 393: Mongrel | Shadow Slave

Sunny was standing on the floor of a vast oval arena. It was covered by sand, which had long ago turned red from all the blood spilled between these ancient walls. The merciless sun burned in the incandescent sky, and the smell of sweat, blood, and death assaulted his nostrils.

'How... realistic.'

A little disturbed, Sunny looked around and saw tall amphitheater stands rising high above the blood-soaked arena. Those were the spectator seats. A crowd was cheering from them, their voices full of macabre fascination, cruelty, and glee. Both men and women were dressed in archaic robes that left their arms and shoulders bare. With bloodthirsty smiles contorting their features, they looked like a horde of lustful demons.

Well... not all of them. Here and there, a strangely clothed person could be seen, observing the fights with a less barbaric expression. The people in archaic clothes were illusions, while the rest were actual observers.

One didn't have to be connected to the Dreamscape to spectate the duels, but some quirky fans preferred to be there in person to achieve the feeling of maximum immersion.

'Lunatics. Those damn simulation pods are too costly to use them for spectating...'

Even though Sunny wasn't poor anymore, seeing such extravagance still pained him. Shaking his head, he finally turned his attention to the arena itself.

Obviously, this illusory environment wasn't very original, but on the other hand, it was a classic. More advanced dreams had vastly different decorations, ranging from realistic to completely fantastical, but for this low-level one, the company running Dreamscape chose a pretty basic narrative.

It was an ancient coliseum — a place where slaves had once fought to entertain their masters, often to the death.

Sunny didn't like it one bit.

The Colosseum was based on a historical structure, but was much larger. Hundreds upon hundreds of warriors roamed the sand of the battle arena, some engaged in fights, some searching for an opponent.

Out here in the Colosseum, most of the participants were Awakened of high enough skill to be considered the elite among the amateurs, but not skillful enough to enter the professional leagues. Just what Sunny was looking for... maybe. Overall, while many of the duelists in the Dreamscape were talented fighters, at the end of the day, there were very few true masters among them.

Real elites spilled blood in the Dream Realm, not in an illusion that had been conjured for the purpose of entertainment. So the level of competency of these people remained to be seen.

Commanding the Soul Serpent to assume the form of the fearsome odachi, Sunny put the blade of the great sword on his shoulder and waited to be challenged. Due to his menacing black armor and fearsome mask, however, people seemed to be reluctant to approach.

At least for a while.

Soon, a young swordsman in a striking bloodred armor approached, a long and graceful espadon resting on his shoulder. With a smile, he looked at Sunny and said:

"Haven't seen you around before... Mongrel? Are you new to the Coliseum?"

Sunny tilted his head and studied the letters that appeared around the swordsman.

"Paradise in Red"

"Victories: 157"

"Defeats: 103"

'Good enough.'

Lowering the odachi, he answered in an even tone.

"...I was born in the Coliseum."

The swordsman smiled, then stepped forward.

"Let me welcome you back, then."

The voice of the Dreamscape immediately spoke, announcing the start of the fight:

"Paradise in Red has challenged Mongrel!"

They clashed on the bloodied sand, moving with enough speed to cause the wind to howl through their armor.

Sunny had left one of his shadows on the ground, and wrapped another one around the Autumn Leaf, where it could do him no good — he didn't want to be too strong, so that his opponents were not completely outmatched and could properly showcase their styles.

As for himself, he had completely abandoned both the flowing style that Nephis had taught him and the grounded technique that he had learned from Saint, relying only on his ability to shadow the enemy's movements.

Paradise in Red was not a master of swordsmanship, but his skill level was not bad. Still, the young man wasn't a match for Sunny, even though he had to forego his practiced techniques and wasn't used to wielding the great blade of the odachi.

The material form of the Shadow Serpent was truly formidable, but due to its size and nature, using it required a lot of adjustment. It was potentially far more devastating than any shorter blade could ever hope to be, but at the

same time, demanded much more skill and strategy to be wielded efficiently. Any strike it delivered was potentially deadly, but so was every mistake made in the process.

Sunny prolonged the fight for as long as he could, learning as much as possible from how his opponent moved and wielded the sword. In the end, however, the strain of the duel turned out to be too much for the other fighter — he wasn't very strategic at how he spent his soul essence, so after five minutes or so, his speed and strength decreased sharply.

Sunny sighed and ended the duel with one precise slash of the Soul Serpent.

The great sword flashed across the enemy's neck, sending his head flying into the air.

The beheaded corpse fell to the ground in a rain of blood, then disappeared in a stream of sparks.

The voice of the Dreamscape thundered from above:

"Mongrel has won!"

'Too bad...'

Five minutes was not enough to truly learn the essence of a battle style. However, Sunny was certain that he would face another practitioner of this battle art eventually. There were not that many popular styles among the amateurs, after all. A few days or weeks later, he was bound to fight against someone with a similar technique again.

Attracted by his flashy victory, a few more challengers approached. Sunny flourished the Soul Serpent, then stopped it abruptly midair. Drops of blood flew to the sand, leaving the dark blade perfectly clean.

Under the mask, he grinned.

'Ah, so cool. Good thing that I learned this trick from Saint, too...'

"Argh! Are you even human?!"

Another Awakened fell to the sand, blood flowing from his mouth.

Sunny took a step forward and slashed down with the Shadow Serpent, easily cutting through the opponent's light armor and splitting his body in half. The great sword he wielded... was truly devastating.

As the corpse disappeared, he cleaned the curved blade of the odachi with a swift flourish and answered with a dejected lie:

"Human? I am not, and have never been, a human."

By that time, a small crowd of Awakened had gathered around to spectate the fights and wait for their turn to challenge him. Hearing his words, one of them laughed:

"If you are not human, then what are you?"

Sunny glanced at him, then shrugged.

"A mongrel."

Internally, though, he was thinking:

'...What the heck?!'

In the past several hours, he had fought twenty-seven people. And out of them, twenty-five — twenty-five! — had been using the same battle style.

It was a practical, but rather simplistic art that relied on straightforward, efficient movements and attacks that were optimal in terms of lethality and energy expenditure, but for the same reason very predictable. In the hands of a master, the style could have been a real menace, but with these talented amateurs, it was useless against anyone with a tiny bit of clarity.

Several of the Aspects the challengers possessed had thrown him for a loop, but in the end, he had defeated them all one after another, gaining a solid grasp of the essence of their style by the twentieth practitioner he fought.

These people were not exactly untalented, but Sunny felt the difference between them and himself sharply. He had to remind himself that, unlike him, they had not spent a whole year fighting for their lives in the hell of the Forgotten Shore.

Most of these young men and women had probably only experienced a handful of real battles in their entire lives: a few in the First Nightmare, and a few on their way to the Gateway. After that, they lived in well-protected Citadels and only ventured outside the walls in large cohorts... if ever.

'Disappointing...'

Although the counter of the [Prince of the Underworld] had grown by twenty-seven victories, Sunny was slightly irritated. This was not what he had hoped for.

Variety, he needed variety. He needed to create a truly versatile library of styles to allow Shadow Dance to be more efficient in the future. The more basic styles he learned, the easier it would be for him to shadow a truly unique technique if he needed to.

...As he was thinking that today was a complete bust, a sudden wave of whispers ran both through the crowd of the Awakened fighters and the human spectators observing them from the stands.

A dozen or so meters behind Sunny, a tall figure suddenly appeared out of thin air.

When people saw the new arrival, their eyes widened.

Chapter 394: One Strike | Shadow Slave

Leo Striker appeared on the Colosseum and looked around with a bit of nostalgia. A few years ago, at the very start of his career, he had been a frequent visitor of this arena... this was where it all had started for him.

Times had changed, of course.

Using the few moments before he was recognized, Leo smiled widely and said:

"Well, well, well. Did you really think that I would forget about the Public Mondays, guys? Of course not! This is a sacred tradition... SACRED, guys. Some of the Strike Force veterans might remember how I started in the amateur arenas, and now that I am a brilliant, famous, and incredibly handsome celebrity, I have to return here from time to time. To, you know... stay humble."

There were currently around twenty thousand people watching his broadcast, and pretty much all of them immediately exploded with a flood of mocking messages. Glancing at the Broadcaster Interface that Dreamscape provided to popular duelists like him, he grinned and winked, humored by some of the good-natured jabs thrown his way.

Leo Striker was not the most extraordinary fighter in the Dreamscape, but over these past few years, he had gathered a rather large following thanks to his skill, flair, and boisterous personality. He was so popular, in fact, that thousands of younger Awakened became enamored with the battle style he and a few of his duelist buddies practiced.

As the result, the Roaring Lion Strike style had become all the rage among the amateur duelists, and his old mentor was now flooded by a deluge of new pupils. That fact really warmed Leo's heart... he was glad to be able to repay the old man for all his patience.

Leo spent most of his days participating in top-level duels on the professional league arenas, but on Mondays, he liked to visit a public arena or two, chat with fans, fight a few amateurs and provide them with pointers as a way to give back to the community.

Today was one such Monday.

Looking around the Colosseum, Leo noticed a small gathering a dozen or so meters away from him and headed over. As he walked, he heard excited voices:

"Hey... isn't that Leo Striker?!"

"No way... wait! It's him! I can recognize that gorgeous armor with my eyes closed!"

"Leo! Love you, man! Keeping it real like always!"

"Strike Force Roar! I've been watching your broadcasts for two years, Leo!"

A friendly smile appeared on his face. Waving at several fans, he approached the crowd of challengers and glanced at the lone figure standing in the empty space in the middle.

'Woah! This dude has style!'

The man in the middle of the crowd wore a beautiful onyx armor that radiated a sense of solemn, dark menace. His face was hidden behind a fearsome black mask, with three twisting horns rising from it like a jagged crown. His hair was stark white, and there were two pools of impenetrable darkness in the place where his eyes were supposed to be.

His weapon of choice was a long, curved odachi forged of lusterless black steel. It rested on his shoulder, seemingly devouring the bright light of the illusory sun.

The stranger looked more like a demon than a human being.

Leo let out an approving whistle.

'Is he also a broadcaster? Huh, I don't recognize those Memories.'

He checked the stats of the demonic warrior.

"Mongrel"

"Victories: 27."

"Defeats: 0."

'A newbie... but a talented one! A perfect KDA, what a rarity!'

In any case, that guy was incredibly photogenic. A duel with him was not going to be interesting due to the gap in their skill, but it would definitely look stunning. Leo felt a little ashamed to break Mongrel's perfect streak, but this talented amateur would receive useful advice in return, which was far more useful.

Who knows, they might meet again in the professional arena one day...

Looking at the invisible camera, Leo raised an eyebrow and asked:

"What do you say, Strike Force? Should we challenge that dark and handsome guy over there?"

As the viewers expressed their approval, he approached Mongrel and gave him a friendly smile.

"Hey there, friend. That's a big sword you got there. Do you even know how to use it?"

Teasing the opponent was another sacred tradition of the Dreamscape, and Leo was rather good at it.

Mongrel shifted slightly and faced him. The disturbing mask stared at Leo, making him shiver slightly for no apparent reason.

"No."

Leo laughed.

"No? You don't know how to use your sword? Well, would you like me to teach you?"

The demonic warrior stared at him and didn't even move.

"No."

'What's up with that dude? Does he not know other words? Come on, work with me here, buddy! I am dying here, trying to make this duel entertaining...'

With a sigh, Leo stepped forward and unsheathed his own blade.

The viewers once again exploded with a flood of messages, and at the same time, the voice of the Dreamscape announced:

"...Leo Striker has challenged Mongrel!"

'Goddammit!'

Sunny stared at the young man in a beautiful azure armor, cursing his luck.

'Why can't he get a hint?!'

Even though Sunny couldn't say a word of truth while wearing Weaver's Mask, he tried to communicate his reluctance to fight this guy... to no result whatsoever.

He didn't have anything against the new challenger... what did the Dreamscape call him, Leo?... but there was one problem.

Just from the way the young man walked, Sunny could tell that he practiced the same damned battle style that everyone else here seemed to practice. And Sunny had more than enough of it for one day.

'Ugh...'

His time in the real world was limited, so he really hoped to experience a more diverse collection of opponents before it ran out.

'Maybe there's still hope. Maybe the next one is going to be different.'

It was better to finish this fight quickly, then.

Sending the happy shadow from the Autumn Lief to his body, Sunny lowered the Shadow Serpent and took a step forward.

His opponent, meanwhile, smiled.

"Let me teach you the first lesson. You should always..."

'...wear a helmet into the battle, fool.'

Dashing forward, Sunny easily deflected Leo's blow and pierced his head clean through by continuing the same motion.

As the corpse of the eloquent young man fell down and disintegrated into a rain of sparks, he flourished the odachi to clean it from blood, returned to his previous spot, and indifferently put it on his shoulder.

'I swear to gods. The next person to challenge me better be using a different style. Otherwise... I might get angry!'

Leo Striker found himself standing in a boundless black void, his mouth agape.

His viewers, too, were uncharacteristically silent.

'One strike... one strike! He killed me in one strike?'

He lingered for a few moments, then turned to the invisible camera and forced out an awkward smile.

"That was... uh... that was really unexpected, right guys?"

Then, his smile grew wide and sincere.

"That, Strike Force, is what people call finding a diamond in a pile of... uh... dung! Incredible luck! Yeah, definitely a stroke of luck. Oh, by the way... has anyone clipped it?"

Chapter 395: Roaring Lion, Hidden Dragon

Leo sent the clip to a couple of his buddies and waited in the dark void, chatting with the viewers and laughing about his terrible performance in the duel against the demonic newbie.

'That Mongrel... there's something about him...'

Just as he had expected, his friends joined him in the Dreamscape almost immediately after receiving the message.

Yes, his defeat was rather embarrassing... but there was an opportunity in every disaster!

This was going to be a very special broadcast.

A rare and bombastic... crossover episode!

Answering the invitations, two figures joined him in the black void. The viewers grew silent for a moment, and then sent so many reactions that the Broadcast Interface almost crashed.

Well, as expected. Both guests Leo had invited were very prominent duelists, at least as popular as he was himself, or perhaps even more.

One wore a heavy plate armor. There was a castle engraved on its breastplate, and four dragons depicted on his pauldrons and vambraces. This was Daoist Saifer, a renowned swordsman who possessed a powerful Aspect that allowed him to control fire.

The other was a taciturn warrior in a grey silken robe. His alias in the Dreamscape was the Fool, and he was known to be one of the most peculiar and persistent duelists in the professional league.

Leo grinned.

"Hey there, Saifer. Hey there, Fool. Long time no see!"

Saifer scoffed, then pointed at him.

"Leo, my friend. What the hell was that? You got killed by an amateur... in one strike!"

The Fool simply shook his head and remained silent.

Leo coughed in embarrassment and looked down.

"Yeah, well... it's not like the two of you never tasted a piece of humble pie, is it? If I remember correctly, Queen Bee decimated both of you just last week..."

Saifer grinned.

"I am ready to be killed by our noble Queen every day. But a newbie? Come on..."

Leo shrugged, then pointed to his sword.

"Alright, alright. But there's a reason the two of you arrived so quickly, right? You saw it too?"

The two duelists glanced at each other, then slowly nodded.

Leo turned to the camera and smiled brilliantly.

"What? None of you battle geniuses have noticed it? Well, well, well. It's this rare moment when I get to mock my dear viewers and their insufferable expert advice!"

He gestured to his friends, then continued:

"For those Strike Force veterans who still remember the early days of my broadcasting... as you might know, these two distinguished gentlemen are actually not only my colleagues, but also disciples of the same cranky old man who taught me swordsmanship. Basically, the three of us are childhood friends, and we practice the same ingenious battle style. The Roaring Lion Strike style."

He paused, and then sighed mysteriously.

"And while it hurts my pride a little to have been defeated by an unknown novice, the real reason why I was so shocked by our duel... IS... YOU WON'T BELIEVE IT... oh yeah, before we do this, I should mention the sponsor of today's..."

Saifer rolled his eyes and interrupted him.

"Cut it, Leo! What he was going to say is that the masked guy used the Roaring Lion Strike style to defeat that dolt. And while there are many — lots and lots, really — people who can beat that loud nuisance in a heartbeat, the fact that someone done so while using our own style is very interesting."

Leo glanced at his friend with vitriol, but then gave up on the ad break and nodded.

"Indeed. So, the three of us are going to go and see who that Mongrel really is, and what is he really capable of..."

Sunny felt that something weird was going on in the Colosseum after he dispatched the young man in azure armor. The other Awakened seemed to stare at him with a bit of confusion... shock, even.

The same went for the human spectators in the amphitheater. Many had changed seats to get closer to him.

'What's the matter with all these people? Did I go overboard and move too fast?'

But no, he had measured his dash to not appear too powerful. Maybe they just liked the spectacle? Sunny was, indeed, giving them a good show. Not that doing so was his intention...

'Anyway... why is no one challenging me? Stop wasting my time, people! I'm on a tight schedule!'

Indeed, no one in the small crowd of Awakened that had been waiting for their turn to fight him seemed willing to step forward now. Sunny stared at them in boredom for a few minutes, trying to understand what was going on. They had been very eager just a few moments ago, no?

Then, someone finally walked toward him, unsheathing a formidable-looking sword.

The guy was wearing plate armor, with an intricate engraving of a castle and four dragons decorating its polished surface. He looked strong, noble, and experienced.

'You. Must. Be. Kidding me!'

The same style... he was obviously practicing the same damn style!

As Sunny's eyes narrowed, the voice of the Dreamscape announced:

"Daoist Saifer has challenged Mongrel!"

Before the guy in plate armor could even attack, Sunny unceremoniously bashed him in the face with the pommel of the odachi, swiped his foot, and then viciously thrust the tip of the great sword into the narrow crack of his visor.

As blood flowed from the steel helmet, the voice of the Dreamscape thundered once again:

"Mongrel has won!"

The faces in the crowd grew a bit pale.

'What the hell is wrong with these people?! Is there no one here who knows a different style?!'

Before Sunny could even clean the blade of the Shadow Serpent, a new challenger approached.

This one was wearing a grey silken robe.

"The Fool has challenged Mongrel!"

The bastard was wielding a heavy saber... and using the same cursed battle art!

Sunny let out a low growl and dashed forward.

The Fool turned out to be more nimble and aware than the last two fighters. He managed to sidestep the attack... sadly, it had turned out to be just a feint. Before he could correct his footing, the odachi pierced his chest and exited from his back.

Sunny tore the great sword out of the enemy's body and stepped back in frustration.

The man in the grey silken robe swayed and stared at the growing red patch on his silk garment. Looking up at Sunny, he silently gave him a thumbs up, then collapsed to the sand in a rain of sparks.

"Mongrel has won!"

'Curse it all! Do I need to go to a professional arena to find a proper opponent?!"

These people were not, exactly, bad fighters... the three last ones especially... but why on earth were all of them so similar to each other?

Sunny looked around and noticed that the Colosseum was deathly silent. Everyone was staring at him with strange expressions.

'Wait... don't tell me...'

He scowled behind the mask, a terrible suspicion entering his mind.

'Is... is this whole arena meant for practitioners of a single style? Was I breaking some unspoken taboo this whole time? That would be a bastard move... no, wait, that doesn't make any sense. I was using the same style as them...'

Suddenly, a familiar face approached him from the crowd. It was the young man in the azure armor. Lion Beater, or whatever...

'No... oh gods, please no! I don't want to fight him again...'

The young man stopped a few meters away from Sunny, hesitated for a few moments, then smiled and asked in a light tone:

"Mongrel, my friend... if you don't mind me asking... what are you even doing here, in this amateur arena?"

Sunny rolled his eyes behind the mask. The answer was really simple: he was here to learn.

But he couldn't say that, of course. He was also too frustrated to come up with a creative lie.

Staring at the young man, he allowed the Soul Serpent to disappear and become a tattoo again, then said somberly:

"I am here to unlearn."

Lion Beater blinked a couple of times, then shifted his weight slightly, clearly intending to unsheath his sword.

'Enough of this!'

With an irritated huff, Sunny commanded the Dreamscape to eject him from the arena and disappeared from the Colosseum in a shower of white sparks.

Climbing out of the simulation pod, he stared at it with resentment, then suddenly flinched and grabbed his hand with another.

"No, no... we don't want the refrigerator accident to happen again, not to this beautiful, shiny, extremely expensive pod... right? Right! I should... I should probably go and get some fresh air... try it again next time, on a more challenging arena..."

With that, he threw the last glance at the high-tech device, and walked away.

...What Sunny did not see, though, was the crowd of Awakened back in the Colosseum, all staring at the empty space where he had stood a minute ago.

Leo Striker stared at it, too, a thoughtful expression on his face.

A few seconds later, he said quietly:

"To... unlearn? Huh."

Chapter 396: Viral Sensation | Shadow Slave

Sunny salvaged some food from the destroyed fridge, had a very late supper, and went down to the basement again, this time to travel to the Chained Isles.

By then, all shadow essence he had spent during the duels and to keep the Mantle of the Underworld from turning back to stone had already been restored.

Wearing the onyx armor required a constant flow of essence to maintain the [Leaving Stone] enchantment active, and with the Soul Serpent assuming its weapon form, Sunny couldn't use the Shadow to keep the expenditure to a minimum. Wearing the Mantle for prolonged periods of time was rather draining... however, it was also a perfect way to train himself on how to manage essence most efficiently. He had no complaints.

...It was funny, though, that the Dreamscape required a person to expend real essence despite being just an illusion.

'Oh well.'

Climbing into his new, state-of-the-art sleeping pod, Sunny lay comfortably in the soft cradle and smiled.

'No more sore muscles! Finally.'

With that, he closed his eyes, and very quickly fell asleep.

While his soul wandered the Dream Realm and his body slept, locked in an underground bunker behind multiple layers of protection, though... several things happened in the real world.

The clip of his short duel against Leo Striker had unexpectedly gone viral.

All around the planet, countless people watched it with a wide range of reactions. Some found it funny, some fascinating, while some simply

scrolled past it as they watched their feeds.

Even those who did not have any interest in the Awakened duels found it striking, though. The image of an infernal wraith clad in black onyx armor defeating a charming, noble human warrior with one swift and ruthless strike was, indeed, very cinematic... just how Leo had predicted. Even if, to his dismay, the roles had ended up being switched.

What's more, even though Sunny had not even known that their fight was being broadcasted, he accidentally looked directly at the invisible camera right after cruelly putting the tip of his odachi through the opponent's eye.

The image of the fearsome black mask staring emotionlessly directly at them, two pools of darkness hiding the eyes of the human being behind it, sent shivers down the spines of people watching the clip.

It was chilling, arresting, and strangely hypnotic.

Many of them had the same question after watching the clip on repeat several times...

Was there even a human there, behind the scary mask?

People who followed the Dreamscape leagues, however, had an entirely different reaction. Although they, too, appreciated the undeniable aesthetic value of the short and striking duel, they paid more attention to the actual meaning of it.

How could a completely unknown novice defeat an established and well-regarded duelist, someone as famous as Leo Striker... in just one strike? The exact moment when Sunny delivered the deadly blow was analyzed, disassembled, and put under the microscope. Was it skill or pure luck? Was it intentional or accidental? Did Leo make a mistake, or was his mysterious adversary just that much better?

The answer was rather confusing: no one had the slightest idea.

Obviously, once people became curious, they didn't stop on just that one viral clip.

Rather swiftly, every fight and every word that Sunny had uttered during his infuriating visit to the Dreamscape were found and published for everyone to see.

...Once people saw the contents of those recordings, the whole duelist circle was violently shaken. One shock was followed by another, and then by yet another, still.

The first thing that people found during their investigation was two more short clips.

One showed Mongrel killing Daoist Saifer in the span of a single second.

The other showed Mongrel killing the Fool... once again, with a single ruthless strike.

All in all, it took him less than a minute to easily crush three of the most renowned young duelists in the world. They weren't the absolute elite, but still some of the best the Dreamscape had to offer.

The conclusion was obvious: his victory over Leo Striker was neither lucky nor accidental. Mongrel was, indeed... just that much better.

But how could that be?!

Was he some other famous duelist in disguise?

People continued to dig, coming to a bewildering conclusion: the man who called himself Mongrel had never entered Dreamscape before that day. His profile showed only two pieces of information:

"Victories: 30."

"Defeats: 0."

And:

"Status: Offline."

After that, many theories appeared postulating that Mongrel was, in fact, a Master who had visited the Dreamscape to have fun. There weren't that many Masters in the world, and all of them had much more crucial things to do than spend their time having illusory duels. Even if they did, however, those duels transpired in private arenas that were created specifically for the occasion, away from the public eye.

Still, if Mongrel was a Master, that would explain it all. He was just much stronger...

But he wasn't.

That theory was debunked when the recordings of his other twenty-seven duels were unearthed. After watching them, the investigating enthusiasts became truly shaken — and for a very strange reason.

It was because those recordings showed Mongrel actually struggling against much weaker opponents.

Now wait a minute... what the hell did that mean?!

How could a man struggle against novices, fighting them for an average of five to ten minutes, and then kill three experienced professionals in three seconds?

The answer was simply mind-boggling. While people who did not know much about combat techniques assumed that Mongrel had been just pretending to be weak, more knowledgeable experts came to a stunning conclusion...

Mongrel only used the styles of his opponents to fight against them.

He came into the Colosseum not knowing anything about the popular Roaring Lion Strike style, and mastered it in the span of a single evening to such degree that even the Fool, Daoist Saifer, and Leo Striker himself —

the three fighters who had popularized the style in the first place — couldn't resist him even for a couple of seconds.

Now, it was the experts' turn to shiver.

Ironically, after understanding what exactly had transpired, they were left with the same question that the people who knew knowing about Awakened duels had after watching the viral clip.

...Was the being wearing the black wooden mask even human?

And all of them, regardless of their interests and level of knowledge about battle arts, were now wondering the same:

"...Who the hell is Mongrel?"

Chapter 397: Mongrel's Wisdom | Shadow Slave

ed his every action and every word, trying to find some hint to his identity, background, and standing.

Although there was not much to learn, they gradually came to perceive his sayings as rather meaningful.

...In fact, people ended up finding too much meaning in them, even though there was none. It was all just awkward lies Sunny had come up with on the spot to fulfill the requirements of the [Simple Trick]. He had never, ever intended to say something profound.

But when had good intentions ever stopped people from over-complicating things?

Without Sunny knowing anything about it, Mongrel had gained a... philosophy.

"Are you new to the Coliseum?"

"...I was born in the Coliseum."

Sitting in a school cafeteria, two students stared at a cheap communicator, their eyes burning with enthusiasm.

One of the boys frowned, then asked in confusion:

"I don't get it... what does he mean? Isn't the Colosseum just a Dreamscape arena? How could a person be born there?"

His friend shook his head with disdain:

"Idiot! Don't you get it? Mongrel doesn't mean that he was born in the Dreamscape! He means that he was born in battle. Those ancient gladiators were slaves forced to fight to the death against their will. Aren't Awakened the same? They are infected by the Spell and have no choice but to battle

Nightmare Creatures to survive. In a sense, all Awakened were born in the Colosseum..."

Somewhere in the outskirts, several workers had gathered together during their short break.

"Are you even human?"

"What is a human? I am not, and have never been, a human."

One of the workers shivered.

"Scary... do you think that Mongrel is actually a Nightmare Creature that infiltrated the real world?"

Another shook his head.

"No, of course not."

The first sighed:

"Then why would he say that he's not human?"

The second worker looked at the dirty tunnel of the industrial air filter exhaust they were cleaning, then at his own calloused hands.

"What the hell does it even mean, to be a human? Do you think that you and I are really humans? No, you fool. That Mongrel has more brains than you, I swear. He at least understands that just having two legs and two hands does not make you a human. He gets how it is..."

The third listened to their conversation and grimaced.

"So what? Yeah, he gets it, but I don't see him complaining. That guy took the hand he was dealt and turned himself into a... a damned sword demon. What have you done? That's the lesson he is trying to teach us, I think. No one will treat you as a human unless you behave like one..."

Far away, in the Sleeper compound of the Academy, a group of young men and women were looking at a screen.

"That's a big sword you got there. Do you even know how to use it?"

"No."

"No? You don't know how to use your sword? Well, would you like me to teach you?"

"No."

One of the Sleepers scratched the back of his head, then asked:

"I don't get it. Why did Mongrel lie about not knowing how to use a sword? He is obviously a very experienced fighter. Maybe even a Legacy! Was he trying to trick Leo into underestimating him?"

A girl standing near him chuckled.

"He didn't lie. Why would Mongrel need to trick Leo? He would win against him fair and square, regardless. No, there's a deeper meaning in his words."

The other Sleeper raised an eyebrow:

"What meaning?"

The girl smiled knowingly.

"Only a boastful duelist like Leo Striker would claim to know his way around a sword. A true master, one who battles Nightmare Creatures in the Dream Realm instead of playing games with pampered Awakened in the Dreamscape, would know that they have infinitely more yet to learn than they already know. That's what Mongrel meant. No matter how good he is, he understands that in the grand scheme of things, his skill and power are like that of an infant."

Her friend was quiet for a while, then asked:

"If that's the case, then why did he say that he doesn't want to learn more?"

The girl shook her head.

"He didn't say that he doesn't want to learn. He said that he doesn't want Leo to teach him. The true enemy of an Awakened is the Spell, not other humans. That's why Mongrel doesn't want to be taught by battling humans... even if he has to. And also, if someone is strong like Mongrel, they can end a fight with one strike. But true strength... true strength is not needing to strike at all. Maybe that's what Mongrel wants. To become powerful enough so that he never has to bare his sword again..."

And just a few hundred meters away from them, on her way to the Academy hospital complex, a young woman in a wheelchair was staring at her communicator with an amused expression on her face.

"What are you doing here, in this amateur arena?"

"I am here to unlearn."

This quote, especially, had become a topic of heated discussion across the network. Among the duelist, it caused a whole philosophical storm. Countless Awakened were passionately debating its meaning. No one knew what exactly Mongrel meant, but everyone had at least a theory.

The only thing everyone agreed on was that his short statement hid profound, fundamental wisdom about the nature of combat and ways to become a master of it.

...Not Effie, though.

Looking at her communicator, she shook her head and said:

"To unlearn? Huh, that guy must have hit his head one too many times. What a dimwit."

Then, she looked at the image once again, and added:

"And also, what's up with that armor? It looks so familiar. For a moment, I thought that Sunny's Echo has run wild. Ha, what a fun idea... the look on his face would have been priceless!"

With that, she shook her head, deactivated the communicator, and continued on her way.

Effie had more important things to do than waste her time thinking about mongrels...

The rest of the world, though, apparently did not.

Chapter 398: Master of his Trade

Blissfully oblivious to the storm his visit to the Dreamscape was causing back in the real world, Sunny opened his eyes on the Altar Island of the Sanctuary.

Because of how much time he had spent fruitlessly searching for worthy opponents on the Colosseum, he arrived on the Chained Isles much later than he usually would. The sunset was still a few hours away, and the sky was clear and bright. He was welcomed by the familiar murmur of flowing water, the rustling of leaves, and a cool breeze.

Sunny flinched slightly and threw a resentful glance at the deep pool of clean water surrounding the small piece of land on which the altar and the ancient tree stood.

During his first visit to the Sanctuary, Saint Tyris herself had brought him here from the real world. Both of them had appeared near the altar... there had been a small problem, though. Sunny had materialized a bit further than people usually did, and as the result, plunged straight into the pool instead of landing on solid ground.

Not a big setback. However, in a moment of disorientation, he almost had a heart attack. Falling into water reminded him of his first minutes on the Forgotten Shore just too much. For a second, he had thought that he was back in that godforsaken place...

Ever since that day, Sunny never ended up in the water instead of on the soil of the Altar Island again, but the scare that first time had given him was still fresh in his memory.

'Not today!'

With a triumphant smirk, he left the white altar behind and headed toward the ring of tall menhirs.

Now that it was day, the Sanctuary looked more populated. Groups of Awakened rested on the grass of the park, some discussing upcoming ventures into the wilderness, some simply killing time until they were able to return to the real world.

One couldn't just enter the Gateway immediately after appearing in the Dream Realm. Perhaps because the soul wasn't able to withstand traveling between worlds too often, perhaps because the Spell did not wish for them to return too quickly, or perhaps for some another, unknown reason, Awakened had to wait several hours before being allowed to use a Gateway again.

The exact time they had to wait was slightly different from person to person, but in general, it was somewhere around ten hours. During these hours, those Awakened who did not wish to risk their lives in the wild expanses of the Dream Realm usually went about their business or fulfilled their duties to the Citadel.

A lot of work went into keeping human enclaves in the Dream Realm going. Apart from the obvious demand to keep watch on the walls and fight off attacking Nightmare Creatures, mundane tasks like cleaning and preparing food were also shared among the inhabitants of the Citadels.

In a sense, each Citadel was a settlement — some were small, some large enough to house thousands upon thousands of the Awakened. The population of the three Great Citadels was even higher, with hundreds of thousands of humans visiting them every day.

The Sanctuary was a rather tiny Citadel, in comparison, so each of the Awakened anchored here had to do their share of work to preserve it. Luckily, Sunny had been assigned a role of an advanced scout — in exchange for his reports about the things he noticed during his expeditions and the movements of Nightmare Creatures across the Isles, he was all but freed from other tasks, only occasionally having to do a small chore or stand watch during the darkest hours of the night.

He was rather happy with that situation.

Sunny greeted a few people he was on somewhat friendly terms with, entered the interior of the Sanctuary, then headed to his room. Now was a good time to finish the things he had not done during his last visit.

Namely, exchange the soul shard he had collected for Memories or credits... oh, and to properly study the ancient coin to draw and describe it for Teacher Julius later.

But the useless coin could wait. Right now, Sunny really wanted to satiate his avarice.

Unlocking the chest that stood at the foot of his bed, he fished out the soul shards off its bottom and unceremoniously threw them into the pack. The strange fruits he had gathered during his last journey also went there, leaving the chest more or less empty.

Noticing the golden coin glinting between a few curios that Sunny had collected in the past two months, he hesitated for a moment, then shrugged, picked it up, and hid it under one of the Puppeteer Shroud's vambraces.

'All set...'

It was time to haggle.

Returning to the park contained within the inner circle of the Sanctuary, Sunny glanced at the Awakened gathered there, walked over to a big, sun-washed rock, and sat down on it. Taking out the soul shards, he placed them on its surface and waited patiently, pretending to be bored and indifferent.

It almost looked as if he was simply enjoying the sun, while the soul shards had somehow appeared near him by accident.

In the beginning, Sunny had to walk around and initiate trades, but by now, the inhabitants of the Sanctuary had already caught wind of the fact that he often had soul shards to trade. Sunny just had to keep his trading operation seemingly humble, at least on the surface.

If people knew how many Nightmare Creatures he really killed, things would become a bit difficult. He was known to be from the Forgotten Shore, which gave him a bit of leeway of how deadly of a hunter he could appear to be, but it was still wise to keep the full extent of his competency to himself.

Of all the people on the Chained Island, only Saint Tyris and her trusted aids knew about his SS evaluation. So whatever soul shards Sunny didn't sell to the local Awakened, he sold directly to the White Feather clan, leaving all parties satisfied by the arrangement.

Soon, the first customer approached, looking at the gleaming crystals with burning eyes.

Sunny smiled brightly.

"Oh, hey there. Looking to trade for a shard or two? Well, you're in luck, my friend... Sunny's Brilliant Emporium is currently open for business!"

Chapter 399: Golden Coin | Shadow Slave

If there was one thing Sunny missed about the Forgotten Shore, it was how scarce the resources out there were. As the result, the value of soul shards was way higher there than back in the real world. Well... the parts of the Dream Realm that were better connected to the real world, at least.

Not that shards were cheap here. It's just that the deals Sunny was able to make were not as lucrative as the ones he had made in the Dark City. He was also not able to bring the soul shards back to the real world with him, which also affected the final price.

In the end, the collection of crystals he had gathered during his last trip through the Chained Island — including those retrieved from Fallen creatures — only landed him three Memories of questionable utility. He fed them to Saint, bringing her shadow fragment counter to [163/200].

'Not bad, I guess.'

After concluding his business in the park, Sunny went to the kitchens and traded the fruits he had found for a bunch of credits.

The fruits were a very rare commodity on the Chained Isles — they could not be made into anything even remotely useful or advantageous, but some bright mind in the Sanctuary had once come up with a method to make them into a very hard-hitting and tasty wine. Sunny himself had sworn off alcohol after his experiences on the Forgotten Shore, but he wasn't against making some money from it.

In the early days of the Sanctuary, the wine was all the rage among the local Awakened. Not too long after it had been established, most of the man-eating vines that grew the fruits had been hunted down to extinction on the island surrounding the Citadel. Now, only people who went further and risked their lives more had a chance to find several fruits, so the cost was rather substantial.

'That should... uh... buy me a new fridge, I think.'

Sunny had only a very vague idea of how much refrigerators cost, but suspected that this recent exchange would be enough to cover the expenses of shopping for a new one.

All in all, he was satisfied with the result of his recent expedition. He was progressing at a steady pace and slowly gathering everything he needed to make it even faster.

...Just in time, considering that Nephis was days away from becoming a devil.

With a slight frown, he exited the ring of menhirs and looked up.

The trades took him several hours to complete, so it was already night. The crescent moon was visible in the dark sky, and the winds grew cold and forceful. Up above, heavy clouds were gathering.

'I think it's going to rain.'

Suddenly in a sullen mood, Sunny sighed and thought about his plans.

Usually, he would be charting out a route for his next venture into the Isles, either going for a yet unexplored ruin or a habitat of the Nightmare Creatures he was preparing to challenge and kill. But these excursions took several days to complete, and he had a lot of business to take care of in the real world right now.

'Can I return already?'

He had only spent around four hours in the Dream Realm, but sometimes, that was enough — for him, at least. Sunny had no idea why his experience with the Gateways was different from most other people, but suspected that it was either because of his two cores or because of the fact that he had spent an entire year in this dead world even before becoming an Awakened.

Maybe the [Spark of Divinity] had something to do with it, too.

In any case, he tended to avoid returning to the real world too fast too often, in order to not attract unnecessary attention. Today, however, he was willing to forego extra caution... the things waiting for him back there were very important, or at least pressing.

With a shrug, Sunny headed toward the Altar Island. Walking on the stone path in complete darkness, he looked up at the veil of clouds hiding the moon and sighed.

'Not like I would really want to venture out in the rain, anyway.'

Approaching the white monolith of the altar, Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then put his hand on it.

Nothing happened.

'...Oh. I guess it's too early, after all.'

What a disappointment.

With nothing to do but kill time and wait for the opportunity to activate the Gateway, Sunny paced a little, stared at the depths of the clear pool, then paced some more.

Finally, he returned to the altar and grabbed the handle of the obsidian knife laying on its surface... purely out of boredom.

Sunny strained every muscle in his body and tried to lift the damned thing, but no matter how hard he pulled, the knife didn't move even by a millimeter.

'Move, damn you!'

However, there was no response.

Giving up, Sunny grimaced and let go of the knife.

'Well, that's a bust... again...'

As he did so, though, a heavy gold coin slid out from under his vambrace and fell on the polished surface of the altar with a melodic ring. It rolled a few times and then landed flat, the face of the beautiful person with the image of the crescent drawn on their forehead looking at him with a carefree smile.

'Oh, right... I have forgotten about that thing...'

Sunny moved his hand to pick up the coin, but at that moment, the veil of clouds split slightly, letting through a beam of pure, pale moonlight.

The light fell on the coin and made it gleam.

...A moment later, the surface of the coin suddenly shone with ethereal radiance. The features of the person etched on it became sharper, then disappeared into the light.

When the light dissipated, the coin was gone.

Sunny stared at the empty spot where it had been just a few seconds ago with a bewildered expression.

It was then when the Spell suddenly whispered into his ear:

[Your Shadow grows stronger.]

Chapter 400: Call of Treasure

[Your Shadow grows stronger.]

Sunny stared at the place where the coin used to be, then blinked.

'What just happened?'

He dropped the coin on the altar, it was illuminated by the moonlight, and disappeared. And then, he received a shadow fragment.

'No way...'

Holding back excitement, Sunny summoned the runes and read:

Shadow Fragments: [198/2000].

The last time he checked, there was only one hundred and ninety-seven. He had definitely, without a doubt, just received a shadow fragment from the strange golden coin.

'So it wasn't an ordinary coin, after all!'

A satisfied smile appeared on his lips.

Not only was the coin special, it was even not cursed. On the contrary, it was blessed!

'Well, that was the easiest shadow fragment I have ever received...'

Suddenly, his eyes widened.

'Wait...'

Weren't there more coins he had left behind on the Iron Hand Island? Three more, at least, had been swallowed by the dead monstrosity.

Before the thought fully formed in his mind, Sunny was already leaving the Altar Island.

'Two things... there are two things...'

The first one was that other coins could, potentially, turn out the same as the first one and reward him with free fragments. The second one was that where there were three, there could be more... much more.

The Fallen Demon he had discovered could have come from a place where a whole treasure trove of miraculous coins was hidden. A whole mountain of them, even. If Sunny was right and managed to somehow trace the path the creature took before dying...

Who knew how much more powerful he would become?

Trying to suppress the giddy feeling of discovering a huge and tantalizing secret, Sunny left the Sanctuary and headed toward the edge of the island. As the sound of waterfalls grew louder and the first drops of rain fell to the ground, a dark silhouette suddenly took a step towards him.

It was one of the watchmen.

"Huh... Sunny, right? Are you really going to go out in that weather?"

Most of the watchmen here in the Sanctuary already knew that he was comfortable in the dark, so their initial surprise about seeing someone leave the Citadel at night had more or less disappeared by now. It was still strange for some of them, though.

Sunny halted for a few moments, then smiled.

"Yeah. Don't worry, I will be fine. I'm not going far, anyway. Just want to check something on the Iron Hand Island."

The watchman hesitated, then shrugged.

"Alright. Be careful out there. Night vision or not, this is not the time for humans."

Sunny thanked the man for his concern, then walked past him.

'Not the time for humans? Good thing I am a monster, then...'

Approaching the edge of the Sanctuary Island, he didn't waste any time and summoned the Dark Wing. Sunny was tempted to simply turn into a shadow and rush toward his goal, but he didn't want to show his powers near the Citadel so openly.

'Patient. Be patient...'

Since the Dark Wing couldn't really allow him to fly, he glided above the chain for as long as he could, then landed on it and continued forward on foot. By that time, the rain was already falling rather heavily. The iron surface beneath his feet was treacherous and slippery, so Sunny had to be careful and watch his step, lest he plummeted down, into the Sky Below.

He shivered, trying to think of a more terrible fate. With no means of real flight, he would just be falling through the darkness, endlessly, until his mind was gone and his body consumed itself from hunger, then slowly turned into dust.

People on the Chained Isles loved to tell horrible stories about unfortunate souls who fell into the Below, and Sunny could easily understand their fear. For that reason, he was very careful not to slip.

'Only fools fall down, knowing what waits for them below. I would never...'

As if to answer his thought, a gust of wind suddenly crashed into him from the side, and a distant bolt of lightning illuminated the sky.

'...To hell with this!'

Not wishing to tempt fate, Sunny dove into the shadows and continued his journey as one of them.

Soon, he arrived on the Iron Hand Island.

The severed arm of the unknown metal giant was still there, making Sunny wonder once again what force could have torn it off the creature's body. Judging by the size of that thing, the owner of the arm must have been of monstrous proportions itself. Not really on the same scale as the walking colossus of the Forgotten Shore, but still undeniably gigantic.

The remains of the winged demon that had swallowed the mysterious coins were there, too.

However, they did not look the same.

By now, only the bones of the fearsome abomination remained, all its flesh long devoured by the gluttonous scavengers of the nightmare world. The grass around the carcass was now higher, too, and had changed its color from the usual green to bright red.

The grass looked... satiated.

Sunny grimaced.

Out here in the Dream Realm, no creature or plant was really what they seemed. Otherwise, the thick forest on the island where he had battled the pack of Fallen Wolves would have been long ago destroyed by the Crushing.

Even the most innocent things were twisted, corrupted, and predatory. Without sufficient caution, even a blade of grass could be deadly.

...But he wanted those coins.

Approaching the wide patch of bloodred grass, Sunny hesitated for a bit, and then took a step forward. He felt the ground moving slightly beneath him, the rustling of the raindrops changing tone as they fell on the grass.

With a deep frown, Sunny summoned the Moonlight Shard and circulated his essence, sending it flowing furiously through the coils of the Soul Serpent. He also collected both his shadows and wrapped them around his body.

The grass swayed slightly, and then grew still.

A subtle smile appeared on Sunny's lips.

Indeed, everything in the Dream Realm was dangerous and deadly... including humans. In fact, Awakened were perhaps one of the most fearsome tribes of creatures in this world, if not in terms of raw power, then at least due to their cunning, wickedness, and unpredictability.

For something as weak as a blade of grass, it was wise to avoid angering one of the Awakened, especially one as dreadful as Sunny.

'Ah. It feels nice to be feared.'

With nothing threatening him anymore, he walked over to the spot where he had seen the coins last and bent down, trying to find the alluring golden disks.

They were just where he had left them.

Chapter 401: Clueless | Shadow Slave

The acid stored in the demon's stomach had melted the grass, but now, new blades were already rising from the ground, taller than before. It took Sunny some time to find the coins between them... the rain did not help, either. But in the end, he discovered all three.

The coins were identical to the first one: they were cast from gold and heavy, a beautiful wooden ship with a tree growing around its mast depicted on one side and the face of the mysterious stranger on the other.

Hiding the coins in his pack, Sunny wiped the rainwater off his face and looked at the remains of the winged demon. In a flash of lightning, he saw the whole creature, red grass growing through its white bones, darkness nesting in the empty eye sockets, terrifying fangs crowding the massive, powerful jaws.

Even in death, the creature looked frightening.

'Where have you come from, ugly?'

With a sigh, Sunny looked at the sky, allowing rain to pelt him in the face for a while. Whatever little chance he had of tracking the flying abomination by following the trail of its blood was now gone. What else could he do?

Closing his eyes for a moment, Sunny walked a few steps and retrieved a piece of gnawed wood from the mud. Just as he had remembered, it resembled a broken corner of a chest, with a strip of metal reinforcing the seam. Both the strip of metal and the wood itself had been violently torn from the rest of the chest, it seemed, by the bite of the dead demon.

Which meant one thing... there had to be at least one chest full of mysterious coins somewhere out there, probably.

But how was Sunny supposed to find it? The Chained Isles was a vast land, full of numerous dangers and hidden places. All he knew about the creature

was that it had been mortally wounded by the dwellers of the Dark Side and then succumbed to the Crushing.

Speaking of the Crushing... the rattling of chains thundered in the distance, announcing that the Iron Hand Island was entering the ascent phase. Sunny had to leave this place quickly. The next time he returned, the bones of the demon would most likely already be turned to dust.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny walked over to the skull of the abomination and dislodged one of its fangs with a powerful kick. Picking up the jagged bone dagger, he studied it for a few moments, and then put it in his pack.

If all else failed, he would try to find an Awakened with affinity to revelations and convince them to perform a divination upon the fang.

There was one person capable of something like that on the Chained Isles, at least. But... Sunny wasn't really willing to request help from that particular seer. Not unless there was no other choice at all.

'We're not there yet.'

Banishing the dark thoughts out of his mind, Sunny threw a last glance at the dead demon and the surrounding area, trying to see if he had missed a clue. However, there was nothing.

With a troubled look on his face, he dissipated into the shadows and hurried back to the Sanctuary.

By the time he returned to the Sanctuary, dawn was not that far away. Sunny snuck on the Altar Island and placed two of the three coins on the cold surface of the stone monolith, then waited for a bit.

Nothing happened.

'Huh.'

Disappointed, he waited patiently for the moon to appear from beneath the dark veil of clouds. After some time, the Sanctuary was finally illuminated by pale moonlight, and two coins on the altar immediately gleamed, reflecting it. Then, they shone with a soft light of their own.

The coin he held up in his hand, however, did not.

A moment later, the Spell whispered, its voice entwined with the rustle of the leaves and the murmur of flowing water:

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Sunny smiled.

'So, both the altar and the moon are needed.'

Hurriedly, he placed the third coin on the altar, and soon heard the Spell repeat itself for the third time:

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

'That... should bring me to two hundred and one.'

And also... was he seeing things, or had the obsidian dagger moved ever so slightly?

With a skeptical frown, Sunny tried to lift the damned knife, but just as before, nothing he did had any effect on it.

'Ugh, whatever!'

His recent discovery was enough of a reward in and of itself. He had received four shadow fragments — the equivalent of killing a Fallen Monster — without having to risk his life one bit. On its own, this amount was not that considerable... but what if he found a thousand, or even a few hundred of these miraculous coins?

What if he reached the treasury where the chest bitten into by the winged demon was hidden?

That... would change a lot.

The problem was, Sunny had no idea where to look.

Pacing back and forth, he thought for a while, and then said to himself:

"I should probably find an expert on all things Chained Isles."

Somebody who might know about this type of Nightmare Creature, their behavior, and usual haunts... somebody who had spent long years in this region of the Dream Realm and was friendly enough to talk to Sunny.

'Now who do I know who fits into all these criteria?'

Sunny stopped pacing, lingered for a few moments, and then turned his head to the ring of massive menhirs.

A strange expression appeared on his face.

In the early morning, a lone figure approached the hallway leading to the White Feather clan's residence.

Saint Tyris and her people occupied the northern part of the Sanctuary's interior. Sunny had no idea what went on there, since he had never been invited, but he knew that both entrances to their compound were usually guarded.

Today was not an exception.

Before Sunny could step foot inside the hallway, a young warrior in a cuirass decorated with etchings of hawk feathers appeared from an alcove and glanced at him with a vigilant expression.

"State your business, Awakened."

Sunny stared at the young man with an earnest expression, then smiled.

"Oh! I am here to see Master Roan. He once told me to come find him if I need anything. So... here I am. In need of something. Can you fetch him really quick?"

The guard blinked a couple of times, then frowned:

"What is this about, exactly?"

Sunny grinned, lingered for a few moments, and then said honestly:

"...Demon hunting."

Chapter 402: Chain worm | Shadow Slave

Sunny had no idea if Master Roan was currently in the Sanctuary, but judging by the fact that the guard did not immediately send him away, he probably was.

The young Awakened gave Sunny an evaluating look, then whistled softly and returned to his alcove. Nothing seemed to happen for a few minutes, but then, Sunny heard the sound of approaching footsteps.

A young woman wearing a simple white garment appeared from behind the curve of the corridor and glanced at him, then gestured for him to follow.

Sunny shifted slightly, then moved forward, walking behind the girl.

'What would you know? I am walking into the lair of a Legacy clan of my own free will. Never say never, I guess...'

He had really never expected himself to do something like this any time soon.

Instead of walking further into the compound, they entered a narrow staircase and ascended to the very top of the Sanctuary. There, massive stone monoliths lay flat on top of the menhirs, creating an almost uninterrupted surface.

There was a whole separate world above the Citadel, as it turned out. Grass and moss covered the expansive stone circle, which stretched far into the distance. Sunny could see guards standing at the outer edge of it, keeping watch on the neighboring islands. Here and there, siege weapons were placed at irregular intervals, aimed at the sky.

Right above the White Feather residence, a graceful structure was built on top of the ring of menhirs. With tall windows and beautiful ivy climbing its walls, it resembled a large stone chateau. The walls of the mansion were still wet from rain and shone softly in the light of the rising sun.

A path led from its door to an airy pavilion at the edge of the stone monolith, with a round table standing in its center.

The mighty griffin was laying near the pavilion, its head hidden under one of the eagle wings, while Master Roan himself seemed to be enjoying a hearty breakfast inside.

The young woman gestured for Sunny to go forward and walked toward the mansion, soon disappearing behind its door.

'...I guess this is how Saints live.'

For a moment, Sunny was full of envy. The chateau on top of the Sanctuary seemed so beautiful, simple, and peaceful... the complete opposite of the noisy, overcrowded, and poisoned world where humans came from.

Of course, that peace was a lie. The Dream Realm might have seemed like a paradise sometimes, but that paradise was dire and twisted, hiding all kinds of horrors that were ready to descend upon you at any moment.

'Whatever. My house is much better, anyway. It has all a man can need, and then some... I bet they don't even have designer lamps here...'

...Pitiful, really.

Entering the pavilion, Sunny greeted Master Roan with all respect he could muster. The older man smiled and invited Sunny to seat with a relaxed gesture.

"Good morning, Sunless. I must admit, I didn't expect you to seek me out so soon. Did something happen?"

Sunny sat down, smiled politely, then shook his head.

"Nothing that I would want to concern you with. You see... I am not here to talk about something that happened, but more about something that might happen."

Master Roan raised an eyebrow and laughed:

"Don't tell me... wait... are you here with a business proposal? Am I about to become a customer of Sunny's Brilliant Emporium?"

Sunny choked.

"Uh... no. What? Where did you hear about that?"

The handsome Master grinned.

"I hear things."

'What are those bastards saying behind my back?!'

Sunny forced out a smile, then shook his head.

"No, no. I am not here as a highly respected, rich, and famous entrepreneur. Nor am I here as a well-regarded member of the Wilderness Survival faculty of the Awakened Academy. I am actually here as an advanced scout of the Sanctuary of Noctis."

Master Roan grew serious.

"Oh. Continue."

Sunny nodded, then hesitated for a bit, and finally said:

"After we parted two days ago, I returned to the Sanctuary. On my way back, however, I rested for a while on the Iron Hand Island. And there... well, I found the remains of a Nightmare Creature there."

The older man frowned slightly.

"That's not unheard of. Iron Hand is usually safe, but you know how Chained Isles are. Nightmare Creatures migrate, sometimes naturally, sometimes to avoid the Crushing."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"That's true. However, the abomination was a Fallen Demon. It is strange to see one that close to the Sanctuary, and especially so because I have never seen or even heard about that type of creature. It was rather scary."

Roan's frown deepened.

"A Fallen Demon on the Iron Hand Island? That is indeed strange. You've done well to bring me this information, Sunless. Did you get a good look at it, by any chance?"

Sunny sighed.

"Well, you see, it was in the depths of night."

Then, he smiled.

"...But, luckily, I can see perfectly in the dark! So, yes. I got a very good look. Let me describe it..."

He described the demon to the best of his ability, not sparing any detail. He even remembered every wound and injury on the abomination's body, hoping that their nature can shine a light on what exactly had killed the bastard.

The longer Sunny talked, the darker Master Roan's face became. Finishing his report, Sunny glanced at the older man and asked:

"So... what type of a demon was that, exactly? And why have I never encountered one before?"

Master Roan shook his head.

"You are lucky to have never met one of these fiends, kid. They are a very rare and vicious breed of Nightmare Creatures, known as Chain Worms. Luckily, it was already dead. Otherwise, I doubt that we would be having this conversation right now. Even I am reluctant to face a demon such as this alone. No offense, Sunless, but if that thing was alive, you would have ended up as its dinner."

Sunny hesitated for a bit, then asked cautiously:

"Chain Worms? Why are they called that?"

The older man sighed, then looked at the breathtaking vista of the Chained Isles in front of them.

After a while, he said:

"It is because these creatures feed on metal. Once one of the heavenly chains is weakened, they appear from the Dark Side to feast on it. Steel weapons are useless against these abominable things, so fighting one, let alone many, is almost an impossible task."

Master Roan stared into the distance with a bleak expression, and then added darkly:

"I've seen whole islands crumble into the Below because of their hunger..."

Chapter 403: Sky Tide | Shadow Slave

Master Roan grew silent for a few moments, then smiled after noticing Sunny's troubled expression:

"The heavenly chains near the Sanctuary are all fine, though. So you have nothing to worry about."

'That's not what I am worried about...'

Sunny had already received a piece of valuable information that could help him find the mysterious treasure. But he wanted to know more...

Before he could ask another question, however, a sudden shadow shrouded the pavilion, the stone chateau, and the expanse of weathered stone surrounding it — as though a cloud moved across the sun, hiding it.

The sleeping griffin stirred and raised its head, its vertical pupils narrowing.

Just a moment later, the shadow disappeared as suddenly as it had appeared. Simultaneously, a strange sound reached Sunny's ears — it was as though a thousand wings rustled as they cut the air.

Then, a woman was suddenly standing at the edge of the stone ring, her silhouette outlined against the rising sun by a bright halo.

It seemed as though she had always been there, but Sunny could swear that there was no one near them just a second ago.

'Oh...'

The woman was tall and slender, her posture straight like an arrow. She was wearing a light steel armor, its pauldrons and greaves decorated with white feathers. Her long blond hair was fluttering in the wind like a cascade of pale gold.

When she turned around, Sunny saw two piercing amber eyes staring at him, and shivered. Her face was cold and stunningly beautiful, more akin to that of a goddess than of a human being.

...The woman's pupils were narrow and vertical, exactly like those of the mighty griffin.

The ruler of the Sanctuary had returned home.

'Crap!'

With a shudder, Sunny forced himself to look away and hurriedly bowed.

This was his second time meeting Tyriss of the White Feather clan, also known by her True Name, Sky Tide... one of the few Saints of the human race, the demigod in charge of the Chained Island.

Just by virtue of existing, the Saint exerted a strange influence on everything that surrounded her. It was not oppressive, like the dreadful aura of Gunlaug's golden armor, just... different. As if the world itself was reacting to her. The blades of grass seemed to bent slightly toward her, the winds sang subtly lower as she approached, and even sunlight appeared to become a bit brighter in her presence.

Master Roan shifted and rose from his seat.

"Good morning, sunshine!"

Sunny flinched.

'Uh... what?'

It took him a couple of seconds to realize that the fearless griffin rider was addressing his wife, and not him.

'Sunshine... sunshine?!'

Is that how he addressed a Saint?!

'Well, she is his wife, after all. I guess?'

Once he thought about it, everything made sense. But still, the idea of addressing a Transcendent as "sunshine" seemed very weird, for some reason.

Sunny cautiously looked up and saw a wide smile on Roan's face. Saint Tyris herself, however, was as cold as ever.

"Good morning, Ro."

Even her voice was cold and heavy, like the howl of an approaching storm.

Turning her head slightly, Saint Tyris looked at Sunny with a silent question.

...Countless poets would have been ruined if they saw the elegant curve of her eyebrow.

'Huh... wow... wait, what am I thinking about?'

Master Roan patted Sunny on the shoulder and said:

"Awakened Sunless visited to tell me about a demon he encountered on the Iron Hand Island. It was a Chain Worm... already dead, fortunately. Still, we should explore the nearby island. Don't you think?"

Saint Tyris lingered for a few moments, then shook her head.

"No need. The only failing chain on the Isles is far away from the Sanctuary, connecting Shipwreck Island to the Twisted Rock. This is where the Chain Worm came from. I just saw it myself."

She turned away, then sighed slightly.

"Of course, we will have to prepare. All islands are connected, after all. After the Twisted Rock falls, its demise will echo through the entire region. Many islands will shift, causing changes to the severity of the Crushing on

others. The migrations patterns of the Nightmare Creatures will be affected, too."

'I should probably get going.'

Sunny cleared his throat, then said awkwardly:

'Uh... it's been an honor to meet you again, Lady Tyris. I... uh... shall take my leave, then.'

Sky Tide nodded indifferently, then said:

"Thank you for informing us of your finding, Awakened Sunless."

He nodded, then rose from his seat and cautiously took a few steps away.

When Sunny was almost out of the pavilion, however, the cold voice of the Saint stopped him:

"Wait."

He turned around and forced out a smile:

"Yes? How can I help you?"

Tyris looked at him for a few moments, then said in a calm, emotionless tone:

"You come from the Forgotten Shore, if I am not mistaken."

Sunny nodded.

"Yeah. What about it?"

The beautiful Saint lingered for a second, then asked:

"Song of the Fallen... do you know her?"

'Cassie? Why bring her up?'

Sunny smiled.

"Yes. We've met. Why?"

Saint Tyris looked at him for a few moments, then said:

"Good. Song of the Fallen will be visiting the Sanctuary soon. She will be glad to see a familiar face, I think."

With that, Sky Tide turned away, letting Sunny know that he was free to go.

He hesitated for a second, then walked away.

As soon as neither Master Roan nor Saint Tyris could see his face, a dark expression appeared on it.

'Coming to visit... what the hell is she coming here for?'

Indeed, just like Sunny, Cassie had chosen Chained Isles as the region to anchor herself to. Their reason was most likely also the same — the proximity of the Isles to the Hollow Mountains.

Luckily, she was not a resident of the Sanctuary. Sunny had no idea how the blind girl had managed it, but she somehow convinced clan Valor to let her and her cohort anchor themselves to the second human Citadel in the region, the Night Temple.

While Sanctuary was closer to the southern border of the region, Night Temple was situated far to the north, almost on the outskirts of the misty Death Zone.

For that reason, the two of them had been comfortably separated and had not seen each other even once in the past months.

But now, that was about to change.

Exiting the White Feather residence, Sunny grimaced.

'Glad to see a familiar face? Hell. I doubt it...'

Chapter 404: Soft Life | Shadow Slave

The Sanctuary was slowly waking up. Now that the sun had risen, groups of Awakened were preparing to venture outside, while those who had stuff to do in the Citadel itself were going about their business. A few of them greeted Sunny as he walked toward the Altar Island.

By now, he should have been able to return to the real world. After everything he had discovered during the night, there was a flame burning inside his chest that demanded action. His eyes gleamed when he thought about the mysterious treasure hidden somewhere out there, in the darkness.

But although Sunny was a very rapacious person, he knew how to keep his avarice in check... well, most of the time.

'Shipwreck Island...'

Sunny had never been that far away from the Sanctuary, but he had heard about that deadly place.

The Shipwreck Island was situated almost at the center of the Chained Isles, far removed from both human Citadels. The Nightmare Creatures there were especially ferocious, and the islands themselves were far more bizarre and dangerous than those closer to the edges of the region.

If one could somehow survive the Crushing and look upon the Chained Isles from above, they would see that there was a vast empty space at the very heart of this shattered land. Some people assumed that this was where the Ivory Tower had once been chained, before all seven of its anchors were broken. After that, the islands bordering the Tear slowly fell into the Sky Below one after another, making it grow wider and wider.

The hole at the heart of the Chained Isles was slowly expanding, and one day, thousands of years from now, it was probably going to devour the whole region.

...But Sunny had no interest in that remote future.

What concerned him right now was that the Shipwreck Island was on the very edge of the Tear, and as such, presented a lot of danger for a young Awakened like him. If Sunny wanted to venture out that far, he would have to study and thoroughly prepare for a long and perilous expedition.

And in the meantime, he had to hurry to the real world.

Even though he felt the call of treasure with every fiber of his being, desperate to reduce the gap between himself and Nephis, the things he had to do back in reality were... crucial.

'Calm down. It's nothing serious, really.'

Approaching the white altar, he glanced at the obsidian dagger suspiciously, then placed his hand on the cold marble.

'There's no reason to worry, so...'

The lid of the steel sarcophagus silently opened, letting out beams of light and clouds of cool mist. Sunny yawned and climbed out of the sleeping pod, then stretched with a satisfied smile on his lips.

His body felt refreshed and energized, as if he just had a long, perfectly comfortable sleep — not at all like what he had to endure in the past two months while using cheaper Academy pods.

'Now that... is what I call money well spent.'

Indeed, the luxurious machine might have been the best purchase he had ever made. Not counting the Mantle of the Underworld, of course...

Leaving the compact underground fortress of his basement, Sunny walked over to the kitchen, glanced at the broken remains of his fridge with a bit of shame, and retrieved a few ingredients to cook himself breakfast from the debris.

Out here in the real world, it was currently early morning. He sent the happy shadow outside to observe the surroundings, and then turned on the stove.

Real eggs, real lettuce and tomatoes, real bread, real bacon, real coffee, real juice... it took him just a few minutes to cook himself a breakfast that would have been considered the epitome of a lavish lifestyle by any inhabitant of the outskirts.

Walking to a dining table that was too large for one person, he placed his breakfast on its synthwood surface and activated his communicator.

There were no new messages, and he didn't really know what else to do with that thing. Usually, people of his age would have an active presence on the network and feeds breaking with all kinds of news, events, and videos, but Sunny had almost no digital presence whatsoever. Nor did he want to have one, really.

He knew how to access various resources and services, of course, and many of the things on the network had once been the stuff of his dreams: the unlimited amount of games, books, shows, and entertainment of all sorts was on the tip of his finger.

But, ironically, now that Sunny had free access to all these alluring things, he had no time to dive into any of them. Right now, he had too much to do, and his dreams were filled with only clangor of steel and nightmarish abominations.

'Maybe one day...'

Slowly consuming his food, Sunny used the communicator to quickly sketch and describe the coin he had found... keeping its true secrets to himself, of course.

Outside, his neighbors were preparing to face the new day. The sun was rising above the giant city, and crowds of people were on their way to work.

The shadow found a hidden spot on the porch of his new home and observed the quiet street from its shelter. It saw a few PTVs drive by, humming slowly as they rolled or levitated toward the exit from the terrace district. Several well-dressed adults walked by, heading for the public transport terminal.

Some time later, it was time for the students in school uniforms to follow them.

Sunny sipped coffee and observed these children through the shadow, trying to imagine himself having such a life.

Waking up in a safe home. Eating the delicious food a parent had prepared for you, not having to think about where your next meal would come from. Going to a place where an unlimited amount of knowledge and mentorship was available to you, completely free. Having no real worries and no real fears.

Just... living.

What a strange existence that would be...

He stared at the students with a complicated expression. They were so... soft. Their clothes were soft, their eyes were soft, and their lives, too, were soft.

How were these children going to survive the real world? The real world was hard, cruel, and unforgiving. Just like Sunny himself was. A person like him had a much better chance of surviving in such a world.

Not to mention the hellscape of the Dream Realm.

Finally, the stream of students grew thin.

One of the last to walk past Sunny's house was a young girl of around fourteen years. She was about as tall as him, with pale skin and black hair. The girl seemed to be a bit uncomfortable in her own body, like all

teenagers tended to be, and the school uniform did no favors to her slender physique.

Her dark eyes, however, were very sharp and clear.

...Luckily, unlike her brother, Rain seemed to have taken after their mother, who was a rather attractive young woman from what Sunny remembered. Even though she was still just a child, he could already see that one day, the teenage girl walking past his home was going to become a real beauty.

Finishing his coffee, Sunny placed the empty cup on the table and sighed.

'...Found you.'

Chapter 405: Going Back to School

Indeed, the awkward fourteen-year-old girl was his little sister, Rain.

And indeed, it wasn't a coincidence that Sunny had bought this exact house in this exact district of the city. While the terrace neighborhood was nice and charming, the real reason he had chosen this home, in particular, was because it stood next to the place where Rain lived.

It was on this street, a year and a few months ago, that he had watched from the shadows as she was having dinner with her adopted family, their warm and happy life displayed for him to see through the wide window of their brightly illuminated living room.

...Well, now Sunny had a living room and a wide window of his own, even though there was usually only darkness behind it.

Back then, he had become painfully aware that his fantasy of saving his little sister was empty and misguided. Rain didn't need to be saved, least of all by a troubled outskirt stray like him... a ghost of the past that she most likely did not even remember. If he had knocked on her door on that night, nothing in her life would have changed for the better.

Sunny wasn't the same penniless kid anymore. He was an Awakened, one marked as a special strategic asset by the government. He was considerably wealthy, connected... even powerful.

But, deep down, he still believed that the statement held true. His clothes and circumstances might have changed, but Sunny himself remained the same. Twisted and damaged, like anyone who had seen the truth of this world would be.

What's worse, now that he had risen above his previous pathetic self, he had a whole swarm of new, much more serious problems. Nephis, the Sovereigns, the legacy of mysterious Weaver... all of these things promised

a future full of turmoil and danger. He was not exactly the kind of person who had good things to offer to anybody.

So, no. Sunny had not changed his mind about keeping himself out of Rain's life. He wasn't going to approach her, and had no desire to meet her face to face.

...There was, however, a problem.

Now that Sunny was an Awakened, statistically, Rain's chances of becoming infected by the Nightmare Spell herself had grown. But even if he forgot about that statistical correlation, there was still a possibility that she would end up in the First Nightmare, no matter how small.

By now, Sunny was eighteen, and Rain was fourteen. Almost every person infected by the Spell had fallen victim to it while being older than sixteen and younger than nineteen, which meant that there were about two years left before Rain would be in real danger, and about four before she would be out of it.

Even if they were more or less strangers and didn't owe anything to each other, Sunny felt... responsible for her. Perhaps Rain did not remember him due to how little she had been at the time of their separation, but he remembered everything. To him, she was the last memento of their long-lost home.

Now that he had the ability to pull some strings behind the scenes to ensure that her chances of surviving the First Nightmare were enhanced — be it through access to better battle instructors or something else — he couldn't just sit still and do nothing.

But to do that, he first needed to understand how well Rain was being prepared already.

Hence, he bought a house near the place where she lived and let his shadows loose to explore the neighborhood and spy on her and her family.

'Uh... when I put it that way, it sure sounds a bit creepy.'

Sunny stood up, yawned, and shrugged. He was an Awakened whose power lay in shadows, deceit, and bloodshed. Before that, he was a street rat willing to do anything in order to survive. Mundane humans had no idea about what he had gone through, what he had done, and what he was capable of as the result.

If they did, they would probably be horrified. So, a little hint of creepiness was only to be expected.

Putting on a warm hoody, he walked outside, hid his hands in his pockets, and headed toward the public transport terminal at a slow pace.

His shadow was a few hundred meters ahead, stealthily following Rain and keeping an eye on her. No one was the wiser to its presence.

Sunny sighed and looked at the cloudy sky.

'Time to go to school, I guess.'

Rain went to a rather elite school, as it turned out. Judging by the prices of the homes in the terrace district, Sunny knew that her adopted family was reasonably well-to-do, but it seemed that he had underestimated either their wealth or their connections.

The school was not the most prestigious out there, but it was close. Enough that only the kids of government officials and conglomerate heirs attended it... for the most part, of course. There were a few kids who seemed to be there because of their academic achievements, but not enough to make a difference.

The children of government servants arrived on public transport, like Rain; the chaebols came in expensive PTVs, which were controlled by personal drivers.

Sitting at a table in a cafe a kilometer or so away from the heavily guarded entrance to the school, Sunny suppressed the desire to whistle.

'That's... like something out of a drama. I wonder if I'll see someone's getting slapped in the face today...'

Suddenly remembering his first encounter with Master Jet, Sunny coughed and rubbed his cheek in embarrassment.

The happy shadow was still following Rain, stealthily moving from one shadowy patch to another. Then, it waited for a good opportunity and dove inside the shadow of one of the kids walking toward the same classroom as her.

Sunny got comfortable and ordered a few pastries and a pot of tea.

He couldn't quite believe that he was going to waste time attending school, of all things, even if it was in that very strange manner. He hadn't been to school in a dozen years already, not counting the month spent in the Academy.

'Well... this should be interesting.'

Chapter 406: Educated Guess | Shadow Slave

A couple of hours later, Sunny was ready to claw his eyes out.

Not because the lessons taught to Rain in school were boring, but because he had to watch a bunch of entitled kids exist in an enclosed space and make it as hard for everyone to learn anything as possible.

The elite school seemed like a place of learning, but in fact, it was more like a battlefield. The hidden politics among the students and the hierarchy of numerous cliques they formed were more complex than the ruthless strife between the factions in the Bright Castle, and judging by their behavior, just as dire.

...But it was not.

No one's life was at stake, no one was going to be exiled and starve to death if they did a wrong thing. All of this was simply about prestige, vanity, and standing.

It was utterly stupid!

However, once Sunny thought about it a bit more, he realized that it was not. Not to them, and maybe not at all.

These kids were put under immense pressure, assigned a numerical value, and forced to compete with each other. As the result, they inevitably developed a fierce sense of resentment toward their rivals, which was only made deeper by the deep sense of insecurity this system instilled in them.

No wonder they were at each other's throats.

The school was, in fact, not only meant to teach the kids the skills necessary to survive and thrive in the real world, but also to destroy the very same softness Sunny had pondered about a few hours earlier.

It wasn't hard to imagine that, at the end of it all, the best and most resilient students would become harsh and jaded, while the rest would simply be broken and discarded.

A wasteful system, and one of very questionable effectiveness.

Sipping tea in the quiet cafe, Sunny shook his head.

'Rich people...'

Luckily for him, Rain seemed to be unaffected by the vitriol her classmates seemed to be more interested in than the actual studying. She sat calmly at the back of the class, avoiding getting embroiled in any drama, and dutifully learned everything the teachers explained to the students.

...The lessons themselves, surprisingly, turned out to be very interesting. Sunny even found himself enjoying these hours very much. There had not been any combat lessons yet, but he did manage to catch this school's version of the Wilderness Survival course, as well as listen to a rather intriguing lecture about the early exploration of the Dream Realm. He also saw a lesson dedicated to various Nightmare Creatures, their biology, capabilities, and weaknesses.

If he had known that much during his first months on the Forgotten Shore... well, it would not have changed much, really. No matter how much a person knew about these things, no Sleeper was meant to face challenges of that magnitude.

And yet, he couldn't help but feel a bit wistful. He had been denied access to this treasury of knowledge as a kid. Who knew how his life would have turned out otherwise? It would have been a lot more interesting and enjoyable, at least.

By then, he had some idea of Rain's depth of knowledge and overall readiness for the Nightmare Spell, but he still did not know how well she was really being trained. He had to see her during a lesson in combat for that.

After a while, Sunny had become a little bit bored. Listening to a lecture about spelltech absentmindedly, he looked around the cafe.

At this hour, there weren't a lot of people there, but that was swiftly changing. The white-collar workers from the surrounding buildings were now on their lunch break, as were senior students of the school. Several noisy groups were occupying tables near him, so he couldn't help but catch bits and pieces of their conversations.

"No way! When is it coming out?"

"In a couple of months, I think."

"Who will play the female lead, then? No, wait! Let me guess..."

These guys were apparently discussing some upcoming film, excitedly wondering about the casting. Something about their conversation appeared strange to Sunny, but he didn't pay it too much attention.

"...none. That is the mindset of a true battle master!"

"No way he meant to say that. Who do you think Lord Mongrel is, a nobody? Of course not! He only said that because he considers social status and renown meaningless. In the eyes of a warrior, such things are not even worth mentioning. The only thing that matters is your strength! That's why he hides his noble upbringing."

Sunny stared at the couple of young men that were in the middle of a heated debate, then shook his head.

'That's hilarious. What are the chances?'

Apparently, there was somewhere else out there with a similar alias. And that guy, from what Sunny could hear, was not only a total buffoon, but also went around calling himself a Lord, pretending to be some wise philosopher and teaching people how to be a "true warrior".

'What an idiot... well, figures. Only an idiot would choose such an alias on purpose, after all. I wonder what this guy's problem is? He has to be

horribly insecure about something, for sure...'

Then, however, he had to focus on Rain again, because she was finally heading for the school's dojo.

The combat lesson was about to begin.

The instructor, surprisingly, turned out to be an actual Awakened. It was a man in his late thirties, with a mighty build and cold eyes of an experienced fighter. Sunny couldn't tell what Aspect the man possessed, but he was obviously not a sheltered non-combatant.

Rain's instructor was the real deal. He had to have enough money to never be required to work a single day in the real world, so the fact that he was teaching a bunch of kids in a school meant that he was doing it either because of his principles or because of an obligation to one of their parents.

In any case, it was a good thing for Rain.

In the next hour or so, Sunny watched the students train and fight each other with various weapons. He expected them to use fake ones, but to his surprise, the Awakened instructor insisted that the kids both wore heavy protective gear and wielded real ones, even if the weapons were blunted to not pose a real danger.

'Good approach, I guess.'

Rain's level was... better than he had expected. Not comparable to someone like Caster or Nephis, of course, but miles better than anything he would have been able to at her age. She was swift, nimble, and strategic, utilizing every opening the opponent presented to her full advantage.

She seemed to prefer using ranged combat, but could hold her own in a melee with the help of a wide range of weapons, from a long spear to a light saber. There were kids who were better than her, and those who were worse, but none who could compare to her in terms of wits.

And yet, a deep frown appeared on his face.

'There is one thing that is lacking.'

...Viciousness.

His sister was not nearly vicious enough.

Chapter 407: Dreamscape Qualifications | Shadow Slave

Judging that he had seen everything he needed to, Sunny rose and left the cafe, then headed home. The happy shadow left the premises of the school, unnoticed, and soon wrapped itself around his body... but not before showing how proud and satisfied it was with its flawless performance.

'Yeah, yeah. You did well.'

On his way back, Sunny was thinking over what he had learned about Rain. His sister seemed to be smart and well-adjusted, and receiving the kind of training most kids in this world could only dream about.

But was it enough?

He did not know. No one could know, really.

After he had returned from the Forgotten Shore, several people told him that they would have never survived in that hell. But their words rang hollow to Sunny, because how would they know? Until a person was thrown into a situation like that, there was no way to tell what would remain of their resolve once everything else had been stripped away.

Brave people broke, while cowardly ones found strength that they had not even known was inside them. Kind people became cruel, while cruel people became lost. Only by looking at a mirror of a nightmare could one truly see their real face.

Before Sunny entered the Forgotten Shore, he had thought himself to be strong. But once there, he had to learn the hard way that his strength was brittle and illusory, that it could shatter under the smallest amount of pressure. To survive, he had to build within himself a new kind of strength, one that could not be broken by anything, or anyone.

That was how he had survived.

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How was he supposed to know how Rain would measure against the horrors of the Spell? And how was he supposed to make her chances of surviving its trials better?

Consumed by these thoughts, Sunny returned home and tried to put his mind at ease.

This was not something that he could decide in a hurry, anyway. For now, he had many other things to do.

Activating the Dreamscape pod, Sunny climbed inside and closed his eyes.

'Time to relax a little...'

At least out there in the Dreamscape, things were simple. He just had to fight, learn, and win.

...Granted, his previous visit to the Colosseum had turned out to be a fiasco. But Sunny had high hopes for more elite arenas. He just had to gain enough victories to enter them — about seventy more to gain access to the lower-ranked professional dreams.

Not that hard...

He had lost all interest in dueling with amateurs, and couldn't wait to meet better opponents who could teach him a variety of polished styles.

'Ah, better do it quickly.'

Appearing on the sand of the Colosseum, Sunny sighed behind the mask and willed the Soul Serpent to assume the form of the somber odachi.

'Huh... that's weird.'

For some reason, today, much more people wanted to challenge him. A literal crowd of Awakened assembled around Sunny in a span of a minute,

staring at him with disturbing intensity. Also, the challengers seemed to be way more talkative...

'What's up with these fools?'

"Hey, Mongrel! What is your real name?"

Sunny stared at the young woman challenging him, then answered with slight irritation:

"Mongrel."

She smiled knowingly, as if struck by a mysterious epiphany, then asked:

"What style do you practice?"

Sunny frowned behind the mask.

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"I practice no style."

The girl opened her mouth to say something else, but he interrupted her by stepping forward and activating the challenge.

Two seconds later, the girl's dead body was already turning into a rain of sparks.

'Why are they so chatty today? I don't have a lot of time. If I want to enter a professional arena next time, I have to be fast...'

Looking at the crowd of Awakened, Sunny sighed dejectedly and growled:

"Words are worthless, silence is gold. Don't waste my breath!"

The challengers looked at each other with weirdly enlightened expressions, then grew quiet.

'That's better! At least they're an understanding bunch.'

Now that people seemed to have lost their desire to chat uselessly before every damn duel, things went much faster. Sunny had no plans of copying the styles of these talented amateurs today, so he could be as efficient as possible.

It required him to really exert himself, though. They were all Awakened, after all... each and every one of them. Behind the black mask, Sunny was sweating an ocean and silently whispering curses.

But what could he do? He just had to get it done.

Because he took no breaks between the duels, his reserves of shadow essence grew dangerously low at some point. Sunny was forced to command the Soul Serpent to return to his body to accelerate the accumulation of essence and slow down its expenditure.

Noticing that he had dismissed his sword, the challengers assumed that he wasn't going to fight anymore and sighed with disappointment.

Glancing at them, Sunny gritted his teeth and hissed:

"Next!"

He was not that far from accomplishing his goal for today, and the Mantle of the Underworld was like a weapon itself. Especially if he manipulated its weight to make his blows carry the weight of a mountain... metaphorically speaking...

His aching muscles protested, but he endured the torment and continued.

'Just a few more...'

As the next challenger stepped forward, Sunny dashed toward him, deflected the glancing blow of a spiked mace with a vambrace, and struck the young man in the face with all the strength he could muster. The black onyx gauntlet grew terribly heavy as it flew through the air, connected solidly... and caused the young man's skull to explode, more or less.

Sunny secretly panted and cursed.

'That... uh... I can't keep this up much longer...'

Luckily, he only had a few more duels to win.

About an hour after he had entered the Colosseum, Sunny finally reached enough victories to qualify for a better arena. By then, he was so tired that he felt like throwing up.

'Goddammit... that was incredibly tough. All in day's work, I guess...'

Throwing one last glance at the crowd of silent Awakened, Sunny shook his head.

'What a bunch of weirdos...'

With that, he gave the Dreamscape the command and left the illusion, both exhausted and satisfied with his progress.

...Left alone on the sand of the Colosseum, the challengers remained quiet for a few minutes.

After a while, one of them said:

"He shook his head."

Another Awakened sighed heavily, then said in a solemn tone:

"Yes. We are not worthy enough..."

Chapter 408: Oh, No | Shadow Slave

Sunny crawled out of the simulation pod and lay on the cold floor for a while, breathing heavily.

'How come an illusory arena is so exhausting?'

The designers of the Dreamscape were really weird. The people who frequented the Colosseum were even weirder, though. Sunny couldn't even begin to understand the quirks of their behavior.

'That's how subcultures are, I guess?'

After a while, he stood up and went upstairs to make himself some food and replenish all the energy he had spent during this intense and taxing hour.

Sunny made himself a light dinner, devoured it with wolfish hunger, and then relaxed in a chair while drinking a cup of delicious tea.

As he rested, his communicator buzzed.

He took a sip of tea, then opened the message Effie had sent him.

"Hey doofus! Have you seen this? I think I found a new boyfriend for your girlfriend!"

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The message ended with a winking emote and an attached video link.

Perplexed, Sunny clicked on the link... and spit out all of his tea.

Forgetting to wipe his chin, he stared at the holographic screen in front of him with wide eyes.

"What... what the hell is this?!"

The video was... of him.

Of his duel in the Dreamscape, to be precise.

Caught in stunning quality, the recording of his short duel against the young man in azure armor was playing on a loop, set to menacing and epic music. The caption read "Mongrel Victorious". Sunny stared at it for a while, then slowly lowered his gaze and looked at the view count beneath the video.

'S—seven... seven zeroes?!'

Was that Leo Striker guy someone famous?

Sunny only came to his senses because of the pressure of his Flaw. Gritting his teeth, he sent Effie a short message:

"I have not seen this."

'What the hell is happening?'

Feeling apprehensive, he went on the network and typed "Mongrel, Dreamscape" in the search bar. Immediately, thousands upon thousands of results showed, all featuring the fearsome image of Weaver's Mask.

Sunny gulped.

"Oh, no. Oh, no."

He opened the first link, and almost spat blood.

"Mongrel defeats Leo Striker, Daoist Saifer, and the Fool in three strikes!"

The short montage of a bunch of his duels played... this one had even more views.

'That doesn't even make sense. Were those two famous as well?! What three strikes, I hit the second guy twice...'

Feeling an approaching headache and a bit of panic, Sunny scrolled through the feed, growing paler and paler with each second.

There were countless videos, captions, and discussions. Thousands of people were fervently debating his duels, his identity, and the hidden meaning of his words. It seemed as if they had somehow become convinced that he was some sort of a profound sage, going around spouting words of enlightened wisdom.

There were whole discussion boards dedicated to interpreting his "teachings"!

"Oh, no..."

Sunny grabbed his head, realizing that the buffoon he had heard being discussed in the cafe... was him! Come to think of it, many of Rain's classmates had been talking about this stuff, too.

Had she seen this garbage as well?

He groaned.

...At least no one seemed to have any idea about who Mongrel was. His efforts to obfuscate his identity were working, as was Weaver's Mask.

But the worst was still to come...

As Sunny was studying the mess he had made, new notifications started appearing in the feed.

"Mongrel returns!"

"Mongrel decimates the Colosseum!"

"Seventy victories in sixty minutes: Lord Mongrel's shocking rampage!"

"Mongrel is Saint [REDACTED]'s bastard son: CONFIRMED!"

He closed his eyes.

'...Gods. What is this crap?'

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Opening a random link, he read in horror:

Mongrel #1 Sympathiser: "I was there, guys! It was incredible! He was like a natural disaster! So awesome..."

Random Shoe: "Did you hear what he said?"

Mongrel #1 Sympathiser: "Words are worthless, silence is gold! So profound. My whole outlook on life changed."

Random Shoe: "Wow, my dad used to say me the same thing when I tried to talk to him after school."

Mongrel #1 Sympathiser: "Wait. Shoe... are you Mongrel's son?"

"User Random Shoe changed their name to Mongrel's Son"

Mongrel's Son: "Aren't we all Mongrel's children?"

Sunny closed the link and went to another page.

"Silence is Gold. One strike of a sword is worth more than a thousand words: an in-depth analysis of the postneonihilist philosophy of Mongrel."

'Postneo... what?'

Stupefied, he opened another link.

"Reacting to Mongrel's 70 wins! You gasp you lose!"

And another:

"Mongrel does not believe in styles. Styles only separate men..."

And another:

"I spent a night with Mongrel: a candid confession of a former idol trainee."

Deactivating the communicator, he sat quietly for a while, and then groaned again.

"Oh, no!"

The new recording of Mongrel's stunning performance in the Colosseum flew around the globe in no time at all. Starved for new information about the mysterious demonic fighter, people became glued to the screens of their communicators...

They were not disappointed by what they saw, to say the least.

Mongrel's already considerable renown — or infamy, depending on who you asked — became even more widespread.

Sunny had grown up in the outskirts, so he had never been really exposed both to the network culture and to the peculiar fanbase of the Dreamscape. That was why he had severely underestimated the effect his recent visit to the amateur arena would have on the people interested in these things.

He had only wanted to reach the number of victories required to access the professional duels as fast as possible, but failed to take into account how outstanding the feat of defeating seventy opponents in just one hour would look from the side.

...Especially considering the fact that he had killed the last half a dozen or so with his bare hands, not even bothering to use a weapon. These last few duels looked especially striking, impressive, and gruesome.

If before people called Mongrel a sword demon, now he had become just a demon in their eyes.

What's worse, even though it took all of his power and lots of effort for Sunny to achieve these victories, due to the fact that his face was always

hidden behind the fearsome mask, he appeared to be completely calm and indifferent, as if defeating so many people in a row was nothing to him.

A walk in the park.

Added to the fact that he had dismissed his sword near the end of the hour and then left after shaking his head, it seemed as though Mongrel was not only a demon, but also held all the rest of the duelists in utter contempt.

Mongrel was disappointed in them...

That disappointment ignited a fire in the hearts of many duelists of the Dreamscape, pushing them to train harder, reach higher, become stronger.

Mongrel's status was always in front of them, reminding these young men and women what they were striving to achieve:

"Mongrel"

"Victories: 100"

Defeats: 0"

And of course, all of them continued to wonder about his true identity.

Very soon, someone made a logical connection: an incredibly talented young warrior appeared in the Dreamscape soon after the hundred survivors of the Forgotten Shore returned to the real world, putting every Awakened there to shame.

Obviously, Mongrel was one of these hundred heroes!

But which one?

It didn't take people a lot of time to solve the mystery.

On one of the discussion boards on the network, an anonymous user wrote:

"Guys, isn't it obvious? Who is among the best of the best of the Forgotten Shore warriors, and also has a big reason to keep his identity a secret?"

Another answered:

"Wait... wait. You're right! It was right in front of us the whole time!"

And then, the shocking piece of news spread through the network as wildfire:

"Mongrel's true identity is..."

Kai of Nightingale!

Chapter 409: Treasure Hunt | Shadow Slave

"Night&Gale representative agency publishes an official statement: popular idol and fashion icon, Night, is NOT the controversial Dreamscape sensation, nor has he ever participated in any scandalous activities under the alias Mongrel..."

Sunny read the latest news title on the screen of his communicator and covered his face with a hand.

'Oh, gods...'

How did poor Kai end up being involved in this mess? Had the world gone completely insane?!

He stared at the message icon at the bottom of the screen nervously, half-expecting to receive an angry message from his friend. Or was it up to Sunny to apologize in advance? Kai had seen him purchasing the Mantle of the Underworld, after all. Even though the onyx armor did not look the same as it had before being repaired and turning from pure stone to the strange stonelike metal, there was a possibility that he would recognize it...

'Ugh. Why is life so hard?'

Sunny shook his head resentfully and stared at the ceiling.

...And then there was the issue of Rain.

Sunny had watched her walk home through the eyes of the shadow, and was once again consumed by uncertainty. Did he need to intervene? What was the best way to help her? Did she even require his help?

There was no easy answer to any of these questions.

He turned off the communicator, sat in the darkness for a while, then stood up and went to the kitchen. Retrieving all the things that could spoil quickly

from the ruined refrigerator, Sunny cooked himself a decadent dinner and ate in tense silence.

'...To hell with this. I'll deal with all these problems after returning from the Shipwreck Island... it shouldn't take me that long to reach it, investigate, and come back anyway. A week at most...'

Why waste time on all this nonsense when there was a treasure waiting for him in the Dream Realm?

Sunny had already retrieved all the pertinent information he could find from the Academy database. All Awakened had some level of access to the base of shared knowledge about the Dream Realm and the Nightmare Creatures, and due to his position as the research assistant assigned to the Wilderness Survival faculty, he had more than most.

It wasn't really enough to venture on such a dangerous expedition, but at least gave him a basic understanding of what to expect. The rest he was going to have to learn from the people in the Sanctuary who had actual experience of traversing those parts of the Chained Isles.

And then, there was also Cassie... she could help him even more.

With a dark grimace, Sunny washed the plates, spent a few moments admiring their design and craftsmanship, then went about preparing himself for a long stay in the Dream Realm.

Soon, he entered the basement, activated the maximum level of security measures, and climbed into the steel coffin of the sleeping pod.

As the lid of the sarcophagus closed, he sighed and thought:

'One week... I bet everyone will forget all about this Mongrel idiocy in a week...'

His gloomy shadow dejectedly shook its head.

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It took Sunny a whole day to talk to everyone he needed to talk to and gather enough information about the Shipwreck Island and the routes he could take to reach it.

As it turned out, the journey promised to be even more perilous than he had expected. Awakened did not usually go that far into the wilderness of the Chained Isles alone, and even established cohorts were reluctant to venture this close to the Tear.

The Nightmare Creatures out there were ferocious and powerful, and the islands themselves presented more danger than here on the edges of the region.

...Those people did not have his Aspect, though. Sunny did not consider himself to be more powerful than a full cohort of experienced Awakened would be, but his powers were tailored perfectly for scouting, traversal, and escape. Even if he was going to find himself facing against an overwhelming foe, he was reasonably certain of his ability to at least run away.

Plus, he had Saint. The taciturn demon was worth half a cohort alone and by herself.

As the sun was crawling down from the heights of the Sky Above, he found himself in his room, studying the makeshift map of the Chained Isles. On it, Sunny had marked the potential routes to the Shipwreck Isles, as well as known dangers he would face on the way.

Of course, such a map was not completely reliable. Nightmare Creatures tended to migrate and travel between islands to escape the Crushing... but the really terrifying ones tended to stay put.

Even taking into account that some of the places he wanted to go through could turn out to be inaccessible due to entering the ascent phase, Sunny was more or less sure that he could reach the Shipwreck Island in three to four days while remaining comparatively safe.

...With one exception.

No matter how he looked at it, he was going to have to traverse an island known among the inhabitants of the Sanctuary as the Reckoning.

Not much was known about that place except for the fact that several cohorts lost members there, while others had not come back at all. Apparently, the creature that inhabited the island was especially twisted and deadly, and was capable of messing with a person's sight.

No one really knew what it was, however. All that Sunny was able to find out was that the creature was most likely not Corrupted. People were under the impression that it was of the Fallen rank, but had different opinions on what its Class was, exactly. It didn't seem to be a Tyrant, at least.

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'I can fight perfectly well even if it plays tricks with my sight. And it's not like I have to defeat it... or even fight it, really. I can just slip past and be on my way...'

With a sigh, he rolled the map up and placed it in his pack. There was already a bit of food and a few supplies for a prolonged journey there. Sunny couldn't take too much with him, since there was a rather small limit on the weight of things he could pull with himself into the shadows.

He could also only do so with inanimate objects... at least for now. He had no idea if that was going to change in the future.

Finally, he opened his chest and took out the fang he had retrieved from the dead Chain Worm on the Iron Hand Island.

Sunny stared at the fang for a long time, a dark expression on his face.

Cassie was going to visit the Sanctuary soon... with this thing and her affinity to revelations, Sunny could make his expedition much safer, not to mention increase his chances of actually discovering the treasure.

...Or he could avoid having to ask her for help and take much more risk, with no guarantee of success.

After a while, Sunny threw the fang back into the chest and closed the lid.

'I'd rather die, honestly.'

With a grim smile, he locked the chest, picked up his pack, and headed to the exit.

As the sun rolled into the dark embrace of the Sky Below and disappeared, he left the safety of the Sanctuary behind, approached the edge of the island, and jumped toward one of the heavenly chains.

Chapter 410: Reckoning | Shadow Slave

Sunny traveled northwest, trying to cover as much distance during the night as he could. He rushed across gargantuan chains as a swift shadow, soared up onto the island, traversed them on foot, and dove into the darkness once he reached the other side.

He was moving across the Chained Isles with enviable speed... but still not as fast as someone capable of flight would. Using Shadow Step expended up a lot of shadow essence, so he had to replenish it often to continue riding the heavenly chains.

That, however, put him in a lot of danger. The islands were teeming with Nightmare Creatures of all kinds, as well as deadly natural... well, unnatural, really... threats. Sunny had to remain cautious at all times, keeping one shadow wrapped around his body while the other scouted ahead.

He hid in the shadows to avoid fighting with wandering abominations or, if there was no other choice, teleported away. These jumps, however, only served to devour more of his essence, forcing him to rest and circulate it through the coils of the Soul Serpent as he waited for his cores to fill up.

Most of the time, he didn't feel like there was a real threat to his life. Sunny's combination of Attributes and Abilities made him a very hard prey to hunt. No matter what kind of a horror tried, he always managed to slip away — for now, at least.

As long as he did not venture into the territory of the really terrifying Nightmare Creatures, like those Corrupted fiends that claimed some of the islands or the beings that dwelled on the dark side of them, he was going to be alright for as long as he managed his essence carefully. Against those powerful abominations, though, even being a shadow was not a guarantee of safety.

He still remembered the two ghostly torches in the dungeon beneath the ruined cathedral in the Dark City...

On his way, Sunny visited many islands that he had already explored before, and some that he never had a reason to visit. Each was lethal in its own way, and hid alluring mysteries... most of which were bound to turn out to be nothing but inescapable traps, of course. He suppressed his curiosity and moved past.

With two skies full of bright stars, the Chained Isles were stunning at night. Even while rushing forward and hiding from the abominations populating this breathtaking and terrible land, Sunny couldn't help but marvel at its dark beauty.

But beautiful things... beautiful things were the most dangerous. By now, he had learned that lesson all too well.

At dawn, Sunny finally reached the island that was supposed to be the first stop on his journey. It was a desolate place where nothing lived, with rocky ground and plenty of small impact craters that had been left behind by the debris on the neighboring island.

The chains holding that island in place had broken once, a long time ago. As the result, not restrained by anything, it soared high into the sky and eventually fell apart, ripped to pieces by the Crushing.

Its remaining neighbor was not of any particular to Sunny, but it was a good place to rest and catch his breath.

Hiding in one of the craters, Sunny ate a miserly breakfast and drank from the Endless Spring. Then, he looked at the rising sun, studied his map for a few minutes, and summoned Saint.

As the taciturn demon stepped out of his shadow — at enough of a distance to not subject him to the soul-eroding effect of the Broken Oath, of course — Sunny glanced at her, tiredly rubbed his face, and said:

"I am going to sleep. You stand watch, please."

The Shadow stared at him indifferently for a second, then nocked an arrow on the string of her bow and turned away.

Sunny sighed.

He could do without sleep for a couple more days, but it was wise to keep himself in the best possible shape. One never knew what could happen in the Dream Realm, after all.

Using his pack as a pillow, Sunny lay down and close his eyes.

'Just a few hours...'

A day later, he reached the Reckoning.

The ominous island that so many people in the Sanctuary dreaded was large, spanning no less than a dozen kilometers across. What's worse, it was supported by only two chains, which were situated almost exactly opposite of each other. Two get to the next one, Sunny had no choice but to travel the whole length of the island.

There was grass covering the ground, with a forest of tall evergreen trees visible in the distance. He could see a rocky hill far away, with a waterfall rushing from a weathered cliff. Just like everywhere on the Chained Isles, it was unclear where the water came from and where it went. Sunny was already used to the strangeness of this land to pay it any attention.

The Reckoning seemed like a beautiful and tranquil place. Idyllic, even.

However, looking at it through the eyes of the shadow, Sunny couldn't help but feel a deep sense of unease. Something... something was very wrong with this place.

It was very picturesque, however, he couldn't see or hear any living beings on the island. There was no sound other than the rustle of the wind, no movement other than the slow swaying of the trees. There were no beasts, no insects, no... anything.

Not a single Nightmare Creature could be seen wandering the expanse of the peaceful island.

What could be so terrible that even Nightmare Creatures did not dare to come to this place? Or had they been slaughtered by the owner of the island? If so, where were the bones? Or bone dust, at least.

'...I don't like this.'

Initially, Sunny thought of traversing the Reckoning in his usual manner, on foot. But now, he changed his mind. It was better to waste an additional amount of shadow essence than to risk meeting the ruler of this ominous place face to face.

If it had a face...

With a frown, Sunny used Shadow Step to leave the heavenly chain and appear on the surface of the island, near the shadow he had sent to take a look at it. Sunny did not assume physical form, preferring to remain incorporeal.

That way, he would be able to reach the other side of the Reckoning unseen.

'Where is that terrible creature, anyway?'

He couldn't see any hint of it anywhere.

Full of grim apprehension, he slowly moved through the deep shadows that were cast by the tall trees of the evergreen forest.

No matter how hard Sunny looked, he didn't notice any movement near him.

It was as though the Fallen abomination that gave the island its name, Reckoning, had simply disappeared.

'Maybe it can't be seen...'

Sunny cut off his vision and concentrated on the Shadow Sense.

His perception of shadows came into focus, reaching far and wide.

And there...

'What was that?!'

There was one shadow in particular that didn't belong to anything, approaching him with terrible speed.

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'The... the bastard is invisible!'

Sunny froze, becoming absolutely still. In this state, he was not only one of the shadows, but also indistinguishable from the larger shadow he was hiding in. He didn't possess a physical body, so nothing was supposed to be able to hurt him in that state. At least physically...

The invisible creature continued to move in his direction, even faster than before.

'Wait... no, something doesn't make sense...'

Even if the abomination was invisible, why was there no sound? Why didn't grass bend beneath its feet?

It was almost as if the Nightmare Creature that dwelt on the Reckoning was... really...

A shadow.

Before Sunny could react, the owner of the Reckoning was upon him.

And then, he learned that...

Shadows, too, could feel pain.

Chapter 411: Reflection | Shadow Slave

Sunny had never fought in his shadow form, and really, he didn't even know how. All he had were his instincts, but that wasn't enough. In fact, trusting your instincts too much was a sure way to get yourself killed.

Intelligence was the most dangerous weapon in the arsenal of a human, and it was Sunny's mind that ended up saving his life.

He had realized that his enemy was not invisible, but a shadow just like him only a moment before the creature was upon him. In that split second, Sunny managed to come up with the only way to escape death.

As sharp pain pierced his entire being, he lunged forward... and escaped the shadows, rolling away on the grass. Jumping to his feet, Sunny staggered and clutched at his side, blood flowing between his fingers.

"Argh..."

The shadow of the unknown abomination lunged in pursuit... and swiped uselessly across his body, not causing him any harm.

It was just a shadow, after all.

Throwing a glance at the thin tear in the Puppeteer's Shroud and a deep wound beneath it, Sunny took a step back. Simultaneously, he gave his shadows a command to hide themselves under his armor and augment his body.

Physical attacks couldn't harm shadows... but shadows also had no way to harm living beings. That was the thought that had saved him. If he had failed to assume the shape of a human in time, he would have been dead by now... most likely.

Because he had not, however, he and the shadow creature were now at a standstill.

The master of the Reckoning Island tried to attack him several more times, each strike ending up as fruitless as the previous ones. Then, it froze, as if slightly confused by the situation.

Sunny finally had a chance to take a good look at the hostile shadow.

It looked just like a shadow would — like a dark, ethereal silhouette of a person painted on the grass in black. The creature seemed to have two legs, two hands, and one head. If Sunny didn't know what it really was, he would have assumed that the shadow was cast by an ordinary person.

There was no one else in sight, though.

Backing away and grimacing because of the pain radiating from the deep wound in his side, Sunny stared at the enemy and thought feverishly:

'No, this is wrong...'

A shadow creature was, indeed, deadly for someone like him.

But to every other human on the Chained Isles, it was completely harmless.

How was it, then, that so many people had been killed by it? And what about the Nightmare Creatures? How had this shadow slaughtered so many living beings?

His eyes widened slightly.

Sunny threw his hand to the side to summon the Midnight Shard... and just in time.

What happened next caused him to shudder.

The creature moved once again, and then, two dark flames appeared in its darkness. A moment later, a human figure stepped out of the shadow. It was a young man with pale skin and cold, cruel eyes of an experienced killer. A spark of madness burned in their depths.

The stranger had black hair and was wearing a light armor made out of soft silk and black, lustreless leather. In his hands, the apparition was holding a long, slightly curved blade of an austere tachi.

Sunny felt fear grip his heart as he recognized the face in front of him.

Of course, he did. It was his own face, after all.

Looking at the devil of Reckoning was like looking into a mirror.

'That's, uh... since when was I so scary?!

Sunny recoiled in shock.

"What the hell are you?"

The apparition mimicked his expression, then opened its mouth. Its lips moved, however, there was sound, as if the abomination was mute.

Sunny had no problem reading its lips, though.

"...What the hell are you?"

'What is going on...'

Before he could finish that thought, though, he had to defend himself against a lightning-fast strike of the enemy's sword.

Sunny deflected the fearsome attack and staggered back, his hands trembling from the force of the impact.

'Curses...'

The bastard might have looked like Sunny, but it was much, much stronger. About as strong as a Fallen Devil would probably be...

Sunny had no time to recover before his evil twin was upon him once again, attacking with the painfully familiar grace of his own battle style. This time, the tip of the tachi missed Sunny's eyes only by a few centimeters.

A vicious smile appeared on the apparition's face.

Sunny grunted.

As the abomination launched a flurry of lethal attacks his way, each swift and vicious, he struggled to defend himself and fought through the pain. He was barely holding on... for now, at least. Because of how strong and fast the creature was, Sunny had no doubt that he'll be killed eventually.

How could he fight against someone who knew all his tricks, but was also much more powerful? Even the Shadow Dance was useless... what was the point in trying to mirror the style of an opponent who had stolen his technique from Sunny himself?!

The situation did not look good, at all. Especially because blood was still streaming down Sunny's torso.

Between two strikes, he dashed back and pierced the apparition with a furious gaze.

"You... poor bastard... of all the faces out there, you just had to choose mine? Fool, couldn't you have chosen someone, I don't know... taller?!"

Internally, though, he couldn't help but think:

'Not gonna lie, the evil version of me looks sort of... awesome. Am I really this dashing in real life?'

Sunny didn't really know how to feel about this.

...He wasn't, of course, trying to speak to the creature because he wanted to chat.

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He was just trying to distract it while Saint was drawing her bow.

A moment later, a black arrow whistled in the air, aimed at the devil's heart.

...However, the young man with cruel dark eyes simply stepped to the side and swiped the arrow away with his sword.

Sunny cursed.

...He became really despondent, though, only a moment later, when a sudden ripple spread through the bizarre creature's body.

In a blink of an eye, the apparition changed. Its face suddenly became white as alabaster and inhumanly beautiful, with ruby eyes, high cheekbones, and full lips. The soft fabric of its armor turned black as onyx and hard as stone. The shape and height of its body changed, too.

Before Sunny could even react, he wasn't facing his own reflection anymore.

Instead, he was facing Saint's.

'Crap...'

As the sickening feeling of his soul slowly falling apart permeated Sunny's entire being, the perfect copy of the taciturn demon raised its bow and sent an arrow flying straight at his heart.

Chapter 412: Perfect Adversary | Shadow Slave

'Well... one mystery is solved, at least.'

Sunny became painfully aware of how the devil of the Reckoning was able to slaughter so many Awakened, and why no Nightmare Creature could survive on its island.

If the bastard was able to turn into a copy of any enemy while remaining as powerful as a Fallen Devil, then very few things could ever hope to escape from it alive.

And those Awakened who had escaped despite everything mistakenly believed that their companions fell to a creature that could mess with people's sight... what else would they think after watching a human being killed by what looked like their exact copy?

Well... why had no one thought that it was an actual copy and not a trick on the eye, damn it?!

If there was one thing that landed Sunny in this dire situation, it was that people in the Sanctuary severely lacked imagination!

...All these thoughts flashed through his mind as he used Shadow Step to disappear and fall awkwardly to the ground a dozen meters behind the devil, completely out of the way of the flying arrow.

'Great... but now what?'

Just a few moments before, Sunny had been contemplating abandoning the fight and simply running away. Unlike some humans he had met in the past, he wasn't burdened by useless things like pride or vanity. If the situation called for a cowardly escape, he was ready and willing to do just that.

But now that the bastard had turned into Saint and was holding a bow, the idea of trying to run was not very enticing. The last thing he wanted was to be hit in the back of his head by an arrow.

'Think, think...'

There was no time to think, though.

The reflection of Saint swiftly spun and lunged toward him. As Sunny teleported further away, the creature suddenly pivoted and crashed into the trunk of a tall, ancient tree.

A moment later, Sunny emerged from the shadows and saw, with horror, a giant mass of heavy wood plummeting on him from above.

Desperately burning through his essence, he filled his body with as much strength as possible and raised his hands, trying to catch the falling tree. As a groan escaped from his mouth, Sunny's feet dug into the soft soil of the Reckoning Island. Somehow, he managed to stop the tree without being crushed by it.

It was at this moment that a second arrow flashed toward his heart...

Only to collide with another one in the air and fly aside.

Some distance away, the real Saint dismissed the bow, raised her sword, and dashed toward the impostor.

'Eat that, bastard!'

Sunny gritted his teeth, strained his already overtaxed muscles, and threw the massive tree at the abomination with a tremendously powerful push. When he used his essence and augmented his body with both shadows, Sunny was able to achieve bursts of truly inhuman strength.

How was the bastard going to escape this?

The creature indifferently lowered its shoulder, then simply disappeared into the shadows and appeared on the other side of the flying trunk. Then, it met attacking Saint with a devastating shoulder bash.

The onyx armor of the taciturn demon cracked, and she was thrown back, causing another tree to explode into a cloud of splinters.

Sunny paled.

'S—shadow Step. Not good...'

The apparition turned to him and mockingly tilted its head.

Something... something was very wrong with that thing. It seemed maleficent and utterly mad, but at the same time... incomplete, somehow. Behind the evil will and terrifying killing intent that dwelled in its ruby eyes, there was a hint of some other, boundless emotion.

Sunny faintly recognized the feeling of it, since he had felt the same deep and indescribable emotion one time before.

Far below the Hollow Mountains, in the darkness of the misty stone labyrinth between to otherworldly rivers, he had sensed the same feeling of loss, anguish, and confusion in the shadows left behind the by companions of the First Lord of the Bright Castle.

'...What even is that thing?'

He had no time to ponder about its nature, though, because the creature had once again turned into a pale young man with dark eyes and was lunging at him, a vicious smile frozen on its lips.

Feeling a cold shiver running down his spine, Sunny realized that he would not win this fight. Nor was he capable of escaping from the Reckoning alive.

This time, he was truly in danger.

He was really going to die on this beautiful, peaceful island... and the last thing he was going to see before falling into the embrace of death would be his own reflection staring back at him through the eyes of his killer.

Unless...

Sunny sent Saint back into the Soul Sea and met the apparition's attack with a block, feeling his body shudder from the force of the blow.

He had assumed that the Devil of Reckoning was a shadow, and it was indeed similar to one... but, really, it was not. It only appeared as a shadow because Sunny himself had been in the form of a shadow when they first clashed. And once he had turned into a human, the devil, too, became a human.

The young man with the cold eyes of a killer took a small step and made a high thrust with the tachi. Sunny, however, knew his one fighting style too well to be caught by that trap. Knowing that the thrust was just a feint, he threw his own blade downward, and just barely managed to deflect a vicious slash that followed. He was late by a fraction of a second, though... another tear appeared in the fabric of the Puppeteer's Shroud, and a shallow wound on his thigh began sipping with blood.

The creature was more of a reflection than a shadow. It mirrored everything about its enemy. Their appearance, their weapons, their battle technique. Even their powers... otherwise, how would it be able to use Shadow Step? In a sense, it was a perfect adversary. But that wasn't all...

Sunny grimaced as the apparition threw his sword away and delivered a powerful kick that almost turned all of his ribs into bone dust. If not for the burst of essence he had sent to his legs, Sunny would have never managed to dodge that devastating blow. But his essence was already running dry, and his enemy seemed to be even stronger now... as if the more Sunny bled, the more powerful the pale young man became.

The devil was even able to mirror the Memories its enemy wielded. Before, Sunny had experienced the soul attack of the copy of the Broken Oath. And now, the creature was obviously being fed raw power by the Blood Blossom...

He attacked with the Midnight Shard to buy himself a couple of moments to think...

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The apparition had not seemed to be affected by the Broken Oath, though. Was that because it had assumed the form of Saint, who was immune to

soul attacks? Did this mean that the devil was able to copy not only powers and Memories, but Attributes, too?

The creature easily deflected Sunny's attack and leaned forward to deliver the final blow. Sunny's only hope to escape it was to jump back...

But what else did the creature copy? Was it really a perfect reflection?

There was only one way to find out.

Instead of jumping back, Sunny stepped forward and collided against the apparition, completely open, unable to escape being struck down by the enemy's blade.

Before the deadly strike came, however, he leaned close to the devil's ear and whispered, so softly that no one except for the two of them would ever be able to hear what he had said:

"Stop, Lost from Light."

And then, the devil froze, as if suddenly turned to stone.

Sunny smiled.

...It was a perfect reflection, indeed.

Chapter 413: Mirror Beast | Shadow Slave

The apparition stood motionlessly, frozen in place by Sunny's quiet command. He could see his face reflecting in its dark eyes, even paler than usual, beads of sweat glistening in the sun. The creature was completely still, all its terrifying strength shackled by the four simple words Sunny had whispered to it.

It was... enslaved. No matter how powerful the strange abomination was, no amount of power could ever allow it to disobey the command of its new master.

...Sunny.

By stealing his face and his powers, the creature had also inherited his Innate Ability, Shadow Bond. Sunny had made use of that bond to subjugate the devil, and now, it was at his mercy.

For now, at least.

With a pained grimace, Sunny fell to the ground and drew in a hoarse breath.

'That... that was close.'

The wound on his thigh was not too serious, but the cut he had received as a shadow was long and deep. Blood Weave had prevented him from losing too much blood and was going to ensure a fast recovery, but it had its limits. The wounds needed to be tended to... however, they could wait.

Right now, Sunny had to decide what to do with the former ruler Reckoning... the dreadful creature that had slain plenty of humans, and only gods knew how many Nightmare Creatures, which was now under his full control.

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Such a powerful abomination... it would surely be very helpful to have something that fearsome serving him, unable to disobey any command.

He glanced at the frozen creature and shivered.

Looking at it was still like looking in a mirror, after all. Despite knowing that the thing in front of him was a Nightmare Creature, he couldn't help but see a slight young man with pale skin and dark eyes... couldn't help but see himself.

Yes, having a Fallen Devil do his bidding would be extremely beneficial, especially because the apparition looked exactly like him. With a bit of cunning and preparation, Sunny would be able to seemingly appear in two places at the same time. If he ever needed to prove that he wasn't Mongrel or accomplish something shady without drawing any suspicion, that would be a perfect way to do so... there were countless scenarios where such an ability would be incredibly useful.

But there lay the problem.

The creature was only enslaved because it had assumed his form. Since the creature could take any shape, it was going to stop possessing his Aspect Abilities — including Shadow Bond — as soon as it turned into something else. Then, it would be free of its shackles and able to do whatever it wanted, including unleashing its wrath on Sunny.

That was why he had dismissed Saint before attempting to subjugate the apparition. He needed it to remain as his own reflection, and no one else's.

Yes, he could circumvent the possibility of losing control over the terrifying creature with a long series of complex orders that would limit when and how it could use its shapeshifting. But coming up with a foolproof net of prohibitions was a herculean task... Sunny wasn't even sure that it was possible.

He had spent a long time thinking of ways to escape this exact fate, so he knew better than most — better than anyone, perhaps — how hard it was to

keep an unwilling slave under control. Especially if the enslaved being was more powerful than its master.

There would always be a way to twist words, find a loophole, and turn the orders given by the master against themselves. Sunny was sure of it.

He had to be.

So... what was he supposed to do with the frozen abomination?

Standing up with a grimace, Sunny faced his perfect copy and looked at it with regret.

The main reason for what he was about to do, nevertheless, was way less complicated. He simply didn't want to be a slaver. He didn't want to own any living thing.

Sunny lingered for a while, and then said.

"Don't be scared. I won't make you a slave. That would be too cruel of a fate, don't you think? Even... even for a Nightmare Creature like you... "

With that, he raised his hand, as if to caress the cheek of the pale young man, and then swiped it swiftly across his neck.

Almost invisible in the bright light, the ghostly blade of the Moonlight Shard trembled as drops of crimson blood fell from it into the vibrant grass.

The young man didn't move, but his pupils widened. A few moments later, blood flowed from between his lips, painting his pale skin red.

Sunny looked at the dying apparition, deeply disturbed by the visage in front of him.

...It was not every day that one got to see himself die.

'That's... that is...'

He paled slightly, but did not look away.

In front of him, a person who looked exactly like himself was slowly drowning in blood, a crimson torrent flowing from his cut throat.

A few moments later, when the creature was on the death's doorstep, its body suddenly trembled, and then shifted slightly. A tortured smile appeared on its face.

The apparition's lips moved, but just as before, no sound escape from them. However, Sunny thought that he had managed to read a few words:

"...we... never... searching."

That was what the apparition had tried to say.

Then, the light in its eyes extinguished. A strange ripple spread over the young man's body, and a moment later, thin cracks appeared on his skin.

After a second or two, the creature shattered into a rain of silver glass, which then turned into a stream of light and disappeared.

Only one jagged mirror shard remained laying in the grass, reflecting nothing but cold darkness.

As Sunny stared at all this in bewilderment, the Spell whispered:

[You have slain an Ascended Reflection, Mirror Beast.]

Sunny blinked.

'Wait... what did it just say?'

The Spell, however, wasn't done speaking.

[...You have received a Memory.]

Chapter 414: Mystery of the Dark Mirror

Sunny stared at the ground, confused.

'What just happened?'

Why did the Spell call that thing and Ascended Reflection? What was a Reflection? And why was it Ascended instead of Fallen?

How could a Nightmare Creature be Ascended?

He frowned.

'...Was it not a Nightmare Creature? How is that possible?'

The apparition was definitely not a human, so what else could it be if not one of the Dream Realm's abominations?

And one more thing...

The Spell did not say that his shadow had grown stronger, did it?

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To make sure, Sunny checked the number of his shadow fragments. Just as he had suspected, it didn't change. He even dove into the Soul Sea, and saw that there was no new shadow among the rows of the creatures he had slain.

'This is very, very strange.'

What the hell had he just killed?

With a deep frown on his face, Sunny bent down and cautiously picked up the jagged mirror shard that the apparition had left behind. No matter how he looked at it, the shard resembled a perfectly mundane piece of glass, with a thin layer of silver painted over its reverse side. The only strange

thing about it was that no matter how Sunny turned the shard, it refused to reflect anything except for an impenetrable veil of darkness.

There was also an inscription on its reverse.

Sunny's frown deepened when he realized that the inscription was not made with runes... instead, what he saw were the familiar letters of the human alphabet. They were clumsy and awkward, as if written by a child's hand.

There was only one word written on the mirror shard:

"Beastie"

'...What the hell is that supposed to mean?'

The mystery of the Mirror Beast was so strange that for a time, Sunny even forgot about the burning pain in his side.

Eventually, he whispered:

"...An Echo?"

Echoes did not possess souls, so he expected that slaying one would not reward him with any shadow fragments, just like what had happened after Mirror Beast's death.

The apparition, however, was obviously not an Echo. It was too independent, sentient, and had too much... individuality to be a simple copy of a dead Nightmare Creature. Not to mention that it had been ruling the Reckoning for the past few years, with no human master in sight.

There was, however, a type of being that it resembled.

Sunny threw a dark look at the remains of a tree that had been shattered by Saint's body.

...In many ways, the strange Reflection resembled a Shadow.

Was the Mirror Beast a type of Echo created by someone's Aspect? Its creator must have been incredibly powerful, then. If so, where were they? What had happened to them, and why was their Reflection wandering the Chained Isles in a feral state?

There were no answers.

It was just a theory, anyway. Sunny had no proof whatsoever to substantiate it.

Maybe his new Memory would give him some answers...

He was about to summon the runes, but a sudden pulse of pain reminded him that he was, in fact, still wounded. With a hiss, Sunny clutched at his side and looked around, searching for shelter.

He was going to have to tend to his wounds... and rest after the fight with Mirror Beast. The Memory could wait until after he wasn't bleeding so much...

Wrapping the strange mirror shard in a piece of fabric and placing it into his pack, Sunny used some of his last remaining reserve of shadow essence to step through the shadows and appear near the rocky hill in the center of the island. His shadow had noticed a shallow cave there, which was situated — obviously — behind the foaming wall of the picturesque waterfall.

Walking on a narrow stone ledge that led behind the waterfall, Sunny checked that the cave was empty, and then entered its cool shade.

The cave wasn't very big, but due to its location and hidden nature, there was no better shelter on the entire island. Rather happy with this discovery, Sunny groaned and lowered himself to the ground.

Sending Saint to keep watch outside, he dismissed the Puppeteer's Shroud, then opened his pack and took out a small box containing several thin needles and a span of silk thread.

Staring at the needles with a deadpan expression, Sunny sighed.

'I hate this part.'

Due to his Awakened body and the nature of Blood Weave, Sunny could recover from most injuries much faster than any mundane human, or even one of his peers, would be able to. However, if he wanted to be able to travel again by tomorrow, he still had to take measures.

With another sigh, the threaded one of the needles, gritted his teeth, and began suturing the edges of the long cut on his side together. The process was not very pleasant, to say the least, so the cave was full of the sounds of heavy breathing and suppressed curses for a while.

Finally, Sunny was done. Washing the dried blood off his body with the help of the Endless Spring, he grimaced and looked around.

Now that he had time to take a better look at the cave, he noticed that it had, apparently, been used as shelter by another human at some point in the past. There was a circle of stones built to contain a fire, with a bunch of firewood arranged neatly by its side. By now, the wood had long rotten, letting Sunny know that the cave remained empty for many years.

There was a pack much like his own laying on the cold stones near the firepit. He limped toward it and took a look inside.

There was nothing of particular interest there — just the usual supplies a traveling Awakened would take with them on a long expedition, most of them ruined by the humidity inside the cave and the passage of time. He did, however, retrieve a rolled-up map and studied it for some time.

The map had been drawn on a piece of monster hide, so the humid air did it no favors. Most of it was unreadable, with only a few small pieces remaining intact. Sunny judged that the person who had left it behind was much more knowledgeable about the Chained Isles than he was... sadly, none of that knowledge had been preserved.

The only legible word he could easily read was written near the edge of the Tear. It read:

"...Hope?"

Sunny sighed.

The stranger whose map he was studying had most likely been killed by the Mirror Beast. For a moment, he entertained the idea that the map had actually been left behind by the creator of the strange Reflection, but that theory made little sense. Why would such a powerful person leave not only his things, but also his creation behind?

Putting the map back into the rotted pack, Sunny glanced at the firepit and said after a long pause:

"I'm sorry that your hopes had been for naught... whoever you were. Now, your nightmare is over."

With that, he hesitated for a few moments, and then finally summoned the runes.

It was time to take a look at the Memory he had received for slaying the terrifying creature that the Spell had called the Mirror Beast.

A few seconds later, Sunny's eyes widened.

'Weapon! It is a weapon...'

Chapter 415: Cruel Sight | Shadow Slave

Sunny stared at the shimmering runes, excitement rising in his heart.

This was what he had been waiting for...

Memory: [Cruel Sight].

Memory Rank: Ascended.

Memory Tier: IV.

Memory Type: Weapon.

'A weapon...'

Sunny had been searching for a new weapon for a long time. He was very fond of the Midnight Shard, since that was the sword he had carried through the darkest time of his life, and which which he had fought his way out of the hell of the Forgotten Shore. It was a very powerful Memory, too, one whose enchantment had saved his life on several occasions.

However, Sunny felt that he had outgrown the austere tachi. Or rather, the obstacles he was facing these days had.

Many of the Nightmare Creatures on the Chaines Isles were of the Fallen rank, and their tough hides presented a lot of resistance to the sharp blade of the Awakened sword. Not to mention those Corrupted horrors that Sunny avoided to the best of his ability, for now, but was inevitably bound to encounter one day.

The other reason he wanted to procure a new weapon was the fact that the [Unbroken] enchantment, while extremely potent and useful, could only be accessed in very rare circumstances... namely, when Sunny was nearing death. This meant that the most powerful trait of the Midnight Shard could only help Sunny if he made a terrible mistake.

If Sunny fought with skill and foresight, however — thus keeping himself from being mortally wounded — the powerful enchantment remained inactive, as it had for the past months. Paradoxically, the better Sunny performed, the less useful the Midnight Shard was to him.

It was nice to have a last resort, but Sunny did not like the idea of relying on a tool that could only be effective if he failed. He wanted to possess a weapon whose enchantments were reliant on his success, and as such, both strengthened him and rewarded him for doing well.

Hopefully, this was one such weapon. It was an Ascended Memory of the fourth tier — equivalent to a Memory he would have received from a Fallen Devil. That was already a tremendous start...

His most powerful weapon right now, the Moonlight Shard, had come from a mere Fallen Beast.

Trying to control his expectations, Sunny trembled in anticipation and read further:

Memory Description: [...Full of pride, the noble knight made a deal with the Dreamspawn. Years later, the knight had defeated all his enemies and became a mighty king. On the day that his son uttered the first word, the Dreamspawn came to the king and demanded his pay. He left the kingdom with the child and disappeared, never to be seen again. Much later, the young prince returned and stood beneath his father's throne. He expected to be met with joy and warmth, but was met with fear and suspicion instead.]

Sunny frowned.

'Huh... what the hell does that mean?'

The description mentioned a Dreamspawn... or rather, the Dreamspawn. That was the name of an Attribute Nephis had, which she possessed because of being born from a Hollow mother. Were there other people with the same Attribute among the human race? There had to be... and, judging by this strange tale, they had been feared even here, in the Dream Realm?

No, that didn't make any sense. Nephis was described as being born of two worlds, so how could a native of the Dream Realm possess the same Attribute?

'Very strange... many the name is just a conscience...'

Sunny shrugged, then concentrated on the runes.

'Tell me what you can do...'

Memory Enchantments: [Shapeshifter], [Light Eater], [Ghost Blade], [Dark Mirror].

'Four of them!'

His eyes gleamed.

[Shapeshifter] Enchantment Description: "This weapon can shift form between a sword and a spear."

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then turned away from the runes and summoned the Cruel Sight. He just had to see this...

A tenebrous mist shrouded his hand, and then, an elegant sword appeared in it. It was much shorter than the Midnight Shard, with a leaf-shaped blade that was about as long as the distance between Sunny's elbow and the tip of his middle finger. The blade seemed to be forged out of polished silver, and served as a perfectly clear mirror. Looking into it, Sunny could see the reflection of his pale face and the wall of the cave behind him.

The hilt of the short sword was made out of polished black wood, which was encased in intricately engraved silver near the guard and at the pommel.

The Cruel Sight was light and swift. Sunny slashed the air several times and smiled. It was going to take some time to get used to using a single-handed sword, but he liked it. It already felt like an extension of his hand. It was much more suited for stealth attacks, too.

The sword was also double-edged, which gave him more freedom in how to use it.

But that wasn't all...

Following a mental command, the hilt of the sword suddenly began to extend. A second later, Sunny was holding a long, graceful spear. The black shaft contrasted against the silver blade, creating a beautiful and somber image. The blade itself kept its length, so Sunny could perform not only thrusting attacks, but also cuts and slashes.

He stared at the somber, elegant spear for a bit, then commanded it to turn back into the sword.

This was going to be a challenge. Sunny wasn't really proficient with polearms, but he had seen how versatile, unpredictable, and deadly they could be in the hands of a master. Not to mention that he had wished to have more distance between himself and the Nightmare Creatures he fought on numerous occasions... this weapon was a perfect combination of mobility and reach, allowing him to effortlessly switch between a nimble shortsword and a devastating long spear.

It gave him access to the best of both worlds.

His smile widened.

"Perfect... this is perfect!"

What else could it do?

There were three Enchantments left:

[Light Eater] Enchantment Description: "The blade of this weapon can reflect, absorb, and expel light."

That would be useful to control shadows, as well as potentially blinding the opponents...

[Ghost Blade] Enchantment Description: "This weapon can strike at incorporeal targets."

An incredible ability that would give Sunny the ability to fight against some of the most dangerous creatures in the Dream Realm, those wraiths that were immune to physical damage.

[Dark Mirror] Enchantment Description: "Each attack of this weapon can be augmented with elemental damage. It can be charged with any element the wielder has been damaged by."

"Current Charge: None."

Sunny gasped.

'A permanent elemental augmentation. This... is... incredible!'

Chapter 416: Hanged Man | Shadow Slave

Sunny stared at the emptiness for some time, thinking.

His new weapon was an Ascended one of the fourth rank, which already made it much more formidable than anything else in his arsenal. It was adamantine and sharp as a razor, which would allow him to cut through Fallen creatures as if they were made of butter... well, not exactly, but rather close. Added to that were the considerable reach of its spear form and the incredible swiftness of its sword form.

But there was more.

The Cruel Sight was capable of augmenting its attacks with elemental damage. That meant that each wound Sunny would deliver to his enemies would be more dire... not only that, but the nature of the augmentation could be changed, which meant that if given enough time to prepare, he would be able to exploit the weaknesses of his opponents with the element they were most vulnerable to.

He just had to get himself wounded by that same element.

'Ouch...'

Everything that was worth it had to hurt a little. Sunny had learned it many years ago.

Speaking of which.

He sighed, then summoned the Cruel Sight and held it in his hands for a bit. Then, he stood up and walked toward the exit from the cave.

As the sound of the waterfall grew louder and louder, he prepared himself.

...A second later, Sunny entered the field of soul erosion emanated from Saint's armor. Instantly, he felt weak and in pain, as though the very essence of his self was being dissolved by a terrible force.

'Argh... curses!'

No matter how many times he was subjected to the effect of the Broken Oath, it was a vile feeling every time. The only good thing about it was that souls, just like bodies, could heal with time. And as long as he did not spend too much time being damaged by the evil Memory, he would be able to recover in a day or two.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny summoned the runes describing the Cruel Sight and simultaneously send essence into its silver blade, activating the [Dark Mirror] enchantment.

As his contorted face reflected in the polished silver of the elegant sword, nothing about it changed. However, the Cruel Sight suddenly seemed... different. As if an invisible, cold, and sharp aura surrounded its edges.

Sunny looked at the description of the [Dark Mirror]:

"Current Charge: Soul."

With a relieved sigh, he took a few steps back and escaped the radius of the Broken Oath. The sensation of his soul being slowly destroyed swiftly disappeared.

The runes, however, did not change.

Sunny had to feed the Memory with a small amount of shadow essence to activate the augmenting enchantment, but its blade would remain entwined with the element of his choice until he charged it with another.

A cruel smile appeared on his lips.

...Just like that, Sunny now possessed a weapon capable of dealing soul damage — the rarest and most insidious type of damage he knew of, one that very few beings out there had any resistance to.

In a span of one day, his lethality had grown manyfold.

Dismissing the somber sword, Sunny turned around and walked back into the cave.

"I guess I am the true harbinger of reckoning now..."

His gloomy shadow lingered for a bit, then scratched the back of its head.

For once, it had nothing to add.

Two days later, Sunny was finally approaching Shipwreck Island. Currently, he was on the neighboring one, hiding in the shadow of a collapsed stone tower that had long ago become overgrown with moss. Somewhere behind him, the body of a giant worm-like creature lay on the ground, its body sipping with foul black blood.

Sunny had spent a lot of essence jumping through shadows to avoid being devoured by that thing. No matter how many times he had pierced its flesh with his spear, the worm seemed to possess an almost endless amount of vitality. The fact that Sunny had no idea where any of the abomination's vital organs were only made the situation worse.

In the end, however, the Nightmare Creature had succumbed to the damage being continuously dealt to its soul. And now, it was dead.

...Swarms of smaller, but no less repulsive worms were already emerging from the ground to feast on its flesh. Sunny did not care — he had already retrieved the soul shard from the creature's body, and he surely had no plans of using the worm's meat as food.

And regardless, his attention was currently concentrated elsewhere.

'What... the hell...'

The Shipwreck Island was currently at the height of its ascent phase, and loomed high above in the sky. As the result, Sunny was able to see its underbelly, far away in the distance.

The downside of the island was shrouded in eternal shadow, and something vast and terrifying was moving in it. The inhabitants of the Dark Side were all powerful and unsightly, but the thing nesting under that one, in particular, was especially harrowing. Perhaps all islands this close to the Tear sheltered such horrors...

But even that was not the thing Sunny was looking it.

'I guess... I have my answer...'

A long time ago, one of the chains connected to Shipwreck Island had broken, and now hung down. Entangled in it, a giant iron corpse swayed slowly in the wind.

The creature resembled a man made entirely out of metal. The heavenly chain had coiled around one of his legs, so the giant hung with his head down, his face rusted and severely damaged. His powerful chest was caved in and shattered by some titanic blow, and one of his arms was torn away at the shoulder.

This was, without a doubt, the creature whose lost limb gave the name to the Iron Hand Island.

The dead giant swayed despondently in the wind, producing sounds of rusty metal scraping against the iron of the heavenly chain. Those sounds were loud enough to reach across the gap between two islands and be heard by Sunny in his hiding place.

Looking at that humbling sight, Sunny shivered.

'Who could have killed such a thing?'

Of course, there was no way to know. Just like always, finding one answer had immediately presented Sunny with a dozen new questions.

Nervously shifting his gaze between the hanged giant and the swarm of worms ravenously devouring their elder, Sunny remained hidden in the shadows and waited.

Soon, the rattling of chains announced that the Shipwreck Island was starting to descend.

Sunny tensed.

'It's time...'

Chapter 417: Shipwreck | Shadow Slave

The chain leading to the Shipwreck Island was about four kilometers long, which was on the shorter side by the Chained Isles standards. As a swift shadow, Sunny would have been able to ride it all the way to his destination in just a few minutes. Sadly, the heavenly chain was currently drawn taut and nowhere near the Sky Below, which meant that its links weren't covered by a thick layer of shadows.

He was going to have to cross it on foot.

As the ground behind him started to move, announcing the approach of something far more hungry and terrifying than the swarm of gluttonous maggots, Sunny slid out of his hiding spot, dashed toward the edge of the island, and jumped down.

Falling through the vast expanse of the blue sky, he landed on the iron surface of the heavenly chain, rolled down a few meters, and then finally caught his balance.

The chain stretched far into the distance, rising higher and higher until it connected with the slowly descending Shipwreck Island. Unlike how it was with the other pieces of land Sunny had seen in this strange region of the Dream Realm, the chain didn't simply disappear into the soil, but instead led to a tall stone structure that resembled a castle gate. Two massive pillars rose high into the sky, overgrown by vines and moss.

The gate itself had been broken a long time ago, and now, the space between the pillars was empty, the wind passing freely through its vast opening.

...Further away, the corpse of the iron giant continued to sway in the air, his one remaining hand pointed at the Sky Below.

Summoning the Cruel Sight, Sunny turned it into the spear and cautiously moved forward.

The further he walked, the lower the Shipwreck Island descended, until finally the heavenly chain became almost horizontal. In about an hour, Sunny crossed the abyss separating two isles and approached the stone structure he had noticed from afar.

Up close, it was even more monumental. He found out that he had been wrong, though: the pillars did not seem like they had ever served to house a massive gate. Instead, they just reached for the sky, built for some unknown purpose. There were weathered steps cut into each of the pillars, leading all the way to the top.

Sunny frowned.

'Who would be crazy enough to climb that high?'

Even now that the island had descended, up there on top of the monumental pillars the Crushing must have been suffocating. With a shrug, he used the Dark Wing to glide upward and climbed onto a wide stone platform between the pillars.

From here, the remains of an ancient road led further into the island. Following it to reach the top of a low hill, Sunny stopped and looked down, at the sight of the peculiar landmark that gave this place its name.

At the very heart of the desolate island, a large wooden ship lay broken on the ground. It must have been beautiful and magnificent once, but now, all that remained of its former glory were the fluid lines of the graceful and narrow hull. The ancient wood somehow remained untouched by the passage of time, but the bow of the ship was completely shattered. There were also large breaches here and there along the length of the wreck, and green vines covering large sections of it.

What was a ship doing at the heart of a land that had no rivers and no seas remained a mystery, but Sunny became hypnotized by the sight of a crushed vessel for a completely different reason.

A triumphant spark appeared in his eyes.

'I guess I am in luck today!'

With a dark smile, he shifted his gaze and looked at the tall mast of the ship.

A dead, withered tree coiled around it, its naked branches stretching into the sky like bones. Sunny recognized that tree, even if it looked very different from how it was depicted on the reverse side of the mysterious coins, full of life and in bloom.

This was the same ship he had seen before.

...Which meant that the coin might have come from inside the wreck, or at least was connected to it somehow.

Initially, Sunny had only planned to scout the vicinity of the island and search for the traces left by the dead Chain Worm. But now, he felt as if this scouting expedition could actually lead him directly to the treasure he so desperately wanted to find. What were the chances that the coins depicting the strange ship came from somewhere else?

Close to zero, most likely.

Now, he only had to sneak into the wreck, explore it, and return in one piece.

...Which was not an easy task, considering how close to the Tear the island was. Sunny could not see any Nightmare Creatures moving across its surface, but he knew that there had to be some, and that they were going to be of the truly dreadful kind.

Still, he wasn't going to turn back now.

'It's worth it...'

Sunny spent some time observing the island. No matter how hard he looked and how much his shadows roamed around, he couldn't see any abominations anywhere near the ancient ship.

...That didn't mean there were none, though. It just meant that they were better at hiding than he was at looking.

After a while, Sunny frowned and summoned Saint. The taciturn demon stepped out of his shadow a few hundred meters down the slope of the hill and indifferently looked around. Then, she dismissed her bow, and instead summoned a melee weapon.

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The Midnight Shard appeared in her hands, its austere blade reflecting the black onyx of the Shadow's armor.

...The two suited each other very well.

Saint turned her back to Sunny, raised the long tachi, and calmly headed toward the distant wreck. After thirty seconds or so, he left his shelter and followed, keeping to the shadows.

Minute after minute passed in tense silence. Despite his expectations, they didn't meet any powerful abominations. The island was quiet and deserted, covered only by overgrown ruins, vines, and piles of broken wood.

When they were halfway to the ship, however, something finally changed.

As Saint approached one of the piles of debris, it suddenly moved.

...And then assembled itself into the shape of a tall, menacing humanoid creature, its hands ending in long jagged blades.

As countless similar piles of splintered wood began to move all around them, Sunny breathed out a curse.

It had started so well!

Chapter 418: Remnant Crew | Shadow Slave

'Damnation!'

Before the first wood wraith could even fully form, Saint was already upon it. The blade of the Midnight Shard flashed through the air... and bit into the body of the creature with the dull sound of an axe striking the bark of a tree.

The effect was somewhat the same: although she managed to do some damage, the wraith simply ignored the shallow cut and lurched forward, towering above the graceful stone knight with destructive menace. Its hands fell down with crushing force, the wooden blades aimed at Saint's helmet.

...Wood couldn't cut stone. Right?

The Shadow seemed reluctant to check. She easily sidestepped the creature's attack and thrust upward, driving the tip of the Midnight Shard into the enemy's neck. Augmented by one of Sunny's shadows, the sword went deep into the adamantine wood.

A moment later, the second shadow wrapped itself around the body of the taciturn demon, causing her skin to shine with dark radiance. The coral gem of the Broken Oath glowed brightly on her black breastplate.

Saint twisted her blade and pushed it sideways, causing half of the wood wraith's neck to explode into a rain of splinters. The creature staggered and lashed out with another strike, but it was too late — the Shadow calmly shifted her weight from one leg to another and delivered a devastating slash, beheading her enemy.

As the wraith fell apart and turned back into a pile of debris, she looked at it indifferently, and then hit the dull side of the Midnight Shard's blade against her shoulder twice.

The voice of the Spell whispered:

[You have slain a Fallen Beast, Sailor Doll.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Sunny gritted his teeth.

'Crap!'

Augmented by two shadows, Saint had defeated one of these Dolls without too much problem.

...However, there were countless more rising from the ground. Sunny counted at least several dozen before losing count.

'What should I do?'

Fighting the horde of Fallen Beasts was clearly suicide. He could either retreat, or order Saint to draw their attention away and sneak onto the ship.

He could also recall one of the shadows, send it ahead, and then use Shadow Step to travel instantly between his current position and the wreck. But that meant leaving Saint weaker.

Decisions, decisions...

'She should be fine for a few minutes, right?'

Throwing a glance at the taciturn demon, Sunny sighed and dashed toward the ship.

"Have fun, you three!"

Saint looked at him, then silently turned away and raised the Midnight Shard.

As Sunny jumped from shadow to shadow, something crashed thunderously behind him.

[You have slain a Fallen Beast...]

'But not too much fun...'

No matter how formidable his demon was when augmented by the shadow and wielding a powerful Memory, she was still just an Awakened. He had to be swift...

As Sunny appeared from a shadow, something massive suddenly lunged at him. Without slowing down, he dove under the blade of another wood wraith, then lashed out with the Cruel Sight. The silver blade of the sword cut through the body of the abomination, leaving a deep gash on its side.

Sunny slid on the moss, escaping from the attack reach of the massive creature. Twisting around, he thrust his sword into empty air. A split second later, however, the hilt of the somber weapon extended, turning it into a long spear. The silver blade pierced the chest of the wood wraith with surprising ease.

The Sailor Doll was still alive, but its soul was damaged. It staggered and took a step forward, driving the spear deeper into its flesh. Sunny tilted his head, then dissolved into shadows and appeared behind the creature. A moment later, the Moonlight Shard pierced its head.

[You have slain a Fallen Beast, Sailor Doll.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Sunny retrieved his weapons.

[You have slain...]

Saint was busy, too.

Glancing back, he saw that she was close to being surrounded by a mass of menacing wooden creatures.

'Not good...'

Not wasting any more time, Sunny turned away and continued moving toward the wreck.

A few minutes later, Sunny reached the broken ship, dove into one of the breaches in its hull, and hid in the shadows. Then, he immediately dismissed Saint.

Making sure that nothing pose an immediate threat to him, he then quickly checked on the taciturn demon in the Soul Sea. The Shadow had received several wounds in the fight against the swarm of wraiths, but none of them was too serious. She was going to have to spend some time restoring herself in the nurturing black flames of the Shadow Core, still.

'Rest well, Saint. You deserve it...'

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then retrieved the Memories he had entrusted to her. Who knew what he was going to encounter inside the ancient ship... it was better to be safe than sorry.

Looking around, he studied the interior of a small room he had found himself in.

Sunny had no knowledge whatsoever of what the insides of a ship were supposed to look like, let alone of an archaic wooden vessel like this one. That was why he couldn't even guess what purpose this cabin had been intended for. All he saw were piles of debris... absolutely mundane, for a change... and thick brown vines covering the walls.

The air was stale and murky. It smelled a little sweet...

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'Oh, crap. Here we go again.'

With a subtle shudder, Sunny stared at the strange reddish-brown vines.

Those things, without a doubt, were alive.

...They were also the source of the sweet smell permeating the air that Sunny was currently breathing.

What was even worse, they were obviously just a small part of some much, much larger organism.

As a strange feeling appeared in his lungs, Sunny sighed, took a piece of cloth from his pack, and wrapped it tightly around the lower part of his face.

'Blood Weave to the rescue. Let's see what's inside...'

He only took a few steps when something gleamed on the floor in front of him.

Bending down, Sunny picked up the small object and stared at it with a complicated expression.

A heavy golden coin rested in his palm.

Chapter 419: Eureka | Shadow Slave

Grasping the coin in his fist, Sunny took a step forward, then cautiously walked around a thick vine sprawled across the floor of the small cabin.

Or was it a wall?

Since the ancient ship was laying on its side and at an angle, it was hard to differentiate the floor from the ceiling. The surface beneath Sunny's feet was skewed, forcing him to bend to be able to keep balance. The piles of debris and the vines weren't making things any easier for him.

By now, Sunny was almost sure that the vines were a part of a larger creature. His suspicion only grew when he climbed through the narrow doorway and left the cabin. Finding himself in a wide corridor, Sunny felt that the sweet smell permeating the murky air became much stronger.

Here, everything was covered by a thick layer of reddish moss, with twisted vines growing through it as they stretched in every direction. Sunny could help but feel as though he was now inside some giant being, with the wooden carcass of the ancient ship serving as its bones, the moss representing its flesh, and the vines being its veins.

The warm breeze that blew through the wreck at rhythmic intervals reminded him of slow breathing of a slumbering giant. It came from somewhere deeper in the ship, bringing with it the sickeningly sweet smell, and then disappeared for a dozen seconds, only to appear again.

'Let's, uh... not do anything to awaken that thing, then.'

Sunny thought for a few moments, and then decided to keep both shadows wrapped around his body instead of sending them to explore the ship. In situations where a confrontation with an unknown enemy could happen at any moment, having them close by was of paramount importance... at least that approach had saved his life many times in the past.

Taking a step forward, he felt the moss spring under his foot, and then swayed. His vision blurred slightly...

'Argh...'

His worse expectations did not come true. Unlike the Blood Blossom, the tiny grains of pollen — or spores, or whatever it was that he had breathed in — had not tried to take root in his lungs and grow through his flesh. Instead, they simply poisoned him.

The posing had entered his lungs, then traveled to his bloodstream, and was now spreading through his body. Sunny could easily see himself losing consciousness and falling to the ground, his body then becoming overgrown by the reddish moss, slowly digested by it, turned into nourishment for the creature that had usurped the wreck of the ancient ship...

But he wasn't going to.

As soon as the poison entered his bloodstream, Blood Weave went into a frenzy. It seemed to really dislike anything alien invading its territory. Slowly but surely, it went about destroying the toxin.

Sunny just had to endure the pain.

Summoning the Cruel Sight, he used the shaft of the spear to help himself keep balance and waited for his vision to become clear again. After a minute or two, Sunny slowly exhaled and continued on his way.

A few minutes later, still suffering from pain and weakness, he picked up a second coin from the moss and stared at it for a second.

The beautiful person with a crescent moon drawn on their forehead smiled at him with a carefree expression. Sunny frowned in response.

'What are you so happy about, fool?'

Turning away, he noticed another coin gleaming in the moss a couple of meters further down the corridor.

...It was almost as if someone left these coins here like breadcrumbs to lead an unsuspecting treasure hunter to their prize.

'...Very convenient.'

Full of unease, Sunny walked over to the third coin, picked it up, hid it in his pack, and then cautiously moved deeper into the wreck.

Soon, he approached a wall with a massive gate barring it. The wooden surface of the wall had cracked and was bent outward, as if something was pressing heavily on it from the other side. The vines out here were especially thick and vernicose, shining in the beams of sunlight that fell through a wide hole in the hull of the ship right above. The sweet smell in the air was almost overwhelming.

Sunny stared at the warped wall, a grim expression on his face. Although he could not see through it, he could feel the shapes of shadows on the other side.

Hidden from him by the thick bulkhead was a much larger, vast and open space. He judged it to be the main cargo hold of the ancient ship. And in it, something massive was moving, slowly expanding and contracting. Brown vines that had devoured the wreck all originated from that place.

The sickening breeze that blew through the ancient ship from time to time came simultaneously with the contracting of the massive shadow.

Sunny lingered for a while, then decided that he had no desire to disturb the slumber of that being. Instead of trying to open the door, he jumped up, grabbed the edges of the hole above him, and climbed onto the exterior of the ship's hull.

He was reasonably sure that a treasure such as miraculous coins would not have been stored in the main hold with the rest of the mundane cargo, anyway. Unless he was absolutely certain that he had no other choice, he was not going to enter it.

Sunny was of a rather high opinion about his abilities, but not so high as to forget all fear. That thing inside was not for him to fight, at least not yet. How was he supposed to kill a giant mass of vines and moss, anyway?

Instead of trying, he walked on the sloping hull of the ancient ship, carefully avoiding breaches through which thick brown vines were crawling outside, and soon passed the area of the main cargo hold.

Now, he was approaching the shattered bow of the ship. Out here, the hull was heavily damaged, with most of it being riddled with wide cracks, jagged holes, and splintered boards.

The sight of it made Sunny wonder about what had happened to the graceful ship he had seen on the miraculous coins. The vessel was obviously not an ordinary one... why had it crashed here, on that remote island? Why was its bow in such a devastated condition? What had the ship sailed on, to begin with? Had it just flown through the skies?

If so, maybe the Crushing had gotten to it.

Feeling that he wouldn't be able to remain hidden in the shadows on this treacherous surface, Sunny crawled back inside and landed softly on the carpet of moss.

...Just a few steps from where he found himself, several golden coins were gleaming on the ground, with one more laying further down the dark corridor.

Sunny cautiously gathered them, then moved deeper into the wreck.

It wasn't long before he found the compartment that must have served as the ship's treasury.

He knew that there was something special about it instantly... simply for the fact that the floorboards around the heavy door were the only place on the entire ancient ship that was completely free of the reddish moss, the vernicose vines, and the air near it was void of the sickeningly sweet smell of the poisonous spores.

Standing in from of the door, Sunny smiled.

'...Eureka!'

Chapter 420: Amazing Chest Ahead

Sunny approached the heavily reinforced door and tried to sense if something was moving on the other side of it.

There was nothing.

It didn't feel as though something dangerous waited for him inside the treasury. On the contrary, with how fresh the air was and how clean the floorboards were, the treasury looked almost... inviting.

He wasn't entirely convinced, though.

Sunny lingered for a bit, then commanded one of his shadows to separate itself from his body and slide under the door. It was going to remain very close, so he was willing to risk weakening himself for a bit.

'How do I even open this thing?'

A moment later, Sunny grimaced and covered his face with a palm.

'...When did I become this stupid?'

Looking through the eyes of the happy shadow, he saw the armored compartment in its entirety.

It was a large room, with a high ceiling and three heavy chests standing in its center.

The entire back wall of the treasury, though, was missing, letting in a flood of sunlight through the jagged edges of a massive breach.

'Of course it's missing!'

The Chain Worm had to have gotten inside somehow, after all. Sunny doubted that the demon could have fit through the door of the treasury, let alone politely lock it behind itself after leaving.

He sighed, then shook his head and decided to attribute this momentary lapse of judgment to the taxing nature of having to endure the pain of being poisoned.

No one was there to witness him making a fool out of himself, anyway!

Regardless, there was no terrifying Nightmare Creature laying in wait on the other side of the reinforced door. Nothing was going to attack him if he entered.

Sunny considered climbing back on top of the hull of the ship and finding a way to enter through the breach in the back wall of the treasury, then simply stepped through the shadows and appeared inside. He was too excited and impatient to waste any more time... not to mention that the more times he spent here, the more chances there were of something going terribly wrong.

If there were really hundreds of coins in one of those chests, though... that would be a trophy to put all other trophies to shame. A find of a lifetime.

Sunny waited for a couple of seconds, letting his eyes adapt to the bright light of the sun, and then studied the three chests standing in the middle of the armored compartment.

All three were open. Two stood empty, but the third...

His eyes widened in shock.

The third chest was long and adamantine, its dark wood reinforced by strips of dull metal. It was large enough to fit an adult man...

And filled to the brim with heavy gold coins. Some spilled out of it and were laying on the floor in a tantalizing pile, showing either the beautiful face of the mysterious charmer or the reverse depicting the ancient ship.

'Thousands... there are thousands of them!'

Sunny felt his heart skip a bit and swayed slightly.

In front of him was a treasure that would take him all the way to forming a third core, and then some. With this many miraculous coins, Sunny would be able to annihilate the gap between himself and Nephis... maybe even overtake her.

'This... this can't be true...'

He instinctively wanted to think that it had been far too easy... but it wasn't, really. He had almost died while fighting the Mirror Beast, allowed Saint to be injured in a fight against Sailor Dolls, walked through the poisonous darkness of the ancient wreck... if it wasn't for the Blood Weave, he would have been already dead.

How many people out there could boast about carrying the legacy of a daemon in their veins? For almost anyone else, this trip would have been fatal. Not to mention that very few could have made the series of discoveries and logical conclusions that would lead them here.

So no, it wasn't too easy to get to where he was currently standing. It wasn't easy at all. And anyway, Sunny was due for a bit of good luck. Recently, nothing had really gone his way... take this whole Mongrel fiasco, for example. Or everything that had happened in the Crimson Spire.

...The heavy chest stood silently, surrounded by sunlight. The golden coins shined in the bright radiance, inviting him to come and take them.

Sunny gulped. This sight was so beautiful. His eyes gleamed with avarice.

'Don't mind if I do...'

Taking several steps forward, he approached the chest.

'Gold is heavy. How am I going to carry all of this back to the Sanctuary? Damnation! I won't be able to enter the shadows with all that burden, too. That is a problem.'

He reached for the coins... but then stopped suddenly. His hand hovered just outside the invitingly opened chest.

Something... wasn't quite right.

Sunny frowned.

'What is it... huh, maybe a can bury the chest and make several trips... wait, no, what's wrong here?'

His frown deepened.

There was no danger inside the treasury. Nor was there anything moving outside of it. The terrifying creature that had been slumbering in the cargo hold of the ancient ship was still asleep. There were no Sailor Dolls wandering nearby, too. So what was disturbing him?

'The... the Chain Worm...'

The Chain Worm had swallowed several coins. He also had a piece of the chest in its stomach, the wood splintered, the strips of metal torn...

Sunny had even thought how lucky he was that the demon decided to feast on the metal reinforcing the chest and bit a chunk out of it, swallowing the coins in the process.

So, if he had torn a piece from the chest... why wasn't the chest missing a piece?

And what had mortally wounded the Chain Worm, anyway?

Confused, Sunny glanced at the two empty chests. They were perfectly whole, with no parts missing. Then, he looked back at the large, heavy chest in front of him, his hand still hovering a few centimeters away from the pile of gold inside.

The chest had all its corners, too.

...One of them, though, was of a slightly different color. Like a patch of new skin that had grown over a wound, and didn't quite match all the rest.

Since when were chests capable of healing?

'What the h...'

Before Sunny could finish the thought, though, the chest seemed to have sensed his hesitation. It suddenly lurched forward, and as massive jagged teeth suddenly appeared from beneath the gold, its heavy lid closed on Sunny's hand with a sickening sound of breaking bones...

Chapter 421: Ecstasy of Gold

As golden coins moved, revealing several rows of terrifying triangular teeth, Sunny recoiled... but it was too late. The heavy lid of the chest suddenly came to life and closed with astonishing speed, another row of fangs appearing from behind its edge.

'What...'

Just a fraction of a second before the creature sunk its teeth into his forearm, Sunny's other hand shot forward. The blade of the Cruel Sight slid between the falling guillotine of the chest's lid and the fabric of the Puppeteer's Shroud. A moment later, the chest closed, and Sunny screamed.

Because of his quick reaction, the creature failed to bite his whole hand off. However, its jaws turned out to be horribly powerful. With a sickening sound, the bones in his arms shattered. Neither the leather vambrace of the Puppeteer's Shroud nor the augmentation of the shadow managed to resist the terrible strength of the gluttonous chest.

Sunny found himself caught in the abomination's crushing maw, with the blade of Cruel Sight laying flat on top of his broken arm and protecting it from being pierced by the sharp teeth that protruded from the lid of the chest. From below, several triangular fangs were slowly sinking into his vambrace. There was no obvious way to free himself...

'What the hell is that thing?'

As several coins fell out of the creature's mouth and rolled on the floor, the chest pressed down harder, making Sunny shriek from blinding pain.

"B—bastard! Let go of me, you vile piece of rotten wood!"

Instead of doing that, the chest moved closer, forcing Sunny to fall to his knees. Something wet and coarse touched his hand, and a disturbingly long and wide tongue emerged from beneath the golden coins, sliding across his arm and dripping with viscous saliva.

Then, the tongue moved toward his neck.

Sunny stared at the horrid sight in outrage, then screamed:

"What the Spell?!"

As the second shadow wrapped itself around his body, gifting him a vast boost in strength, Sunny tried to pull his broken arm out of the abomination's maw, but its bite was just too damn overbearing. All he accomplished was almost knocking himself out from the pain of bone shards scraping against each other.

"Argh! Crap!"

As the unnaturally long tongue of the chest almost reached Sunny's neck, he growled, and then commanded the Cruel Sight to turn into a spear. At the same time, he activated the [Dark Mirror] enchantment with a burst of shadow essence, imbuing the silver blade with soul-destroying power.

The Memory extended inside the creature's mouth, hitting it in the back of the... whatever it had instead of a throat. The tip of the spear sunk into the adamantine wood only by a centimeter or two... the wound was by no means serious, but it must have hurt the chest a lot, because it suddenly let out a shrill shriek, and then spat Sunny's maimed arm out.

Sunny fell to the floor and rolled away, then rose to one knee.

'Yes!'

Before he could celebrate getting his freedom back, however, the chest suddenly swayed... and then rose into the air, revealing a gaunt and revolting body hiding beneath. More coins rolled on the floor.

The abomination must have been a masterful contortionist, because at its full height, it was almost three meters tall. Sunny had no idea how the creature managed to hide all that bony flesh inside the fake chest, even if the chest was large enough to swallow a human whole. Its long and

emaciated limbs unfolded with repulsive cracking sounds, and then, it towered menacingly above Sunny, the long tongue dripping with saliva.

'Oh, curse it a...'

Before he could even react, the creature moved one of its long legs... and kicked him in the chest with the force of a derailling train.

Sunny's body shot back, smashed through the reinforced door of the armored compartment, and rolled into the corridor outside.

He tried to groan, but all the air had been knocked out of his lungs by the terrible collision. His skull seemed to be in one piece, as was his spine... barely. It did feel, however, as though his entire body had recently suffered from being stomped on by a whole herd of elephants.

In his disoriented state, Sunny couldn't help but think confusedly:

'...Elephant... what the hell is an elephant?'

Then, however, all thoughts disappeared from his head, because he noticed the vile creature falling on all fours, and then launching itself forward, the lid of the chest rising for another bite.

When the abomination landed, though, there was nothing to bite into. Sunny had used Shadow Step and fell out of a shadow ten meters further into the corridor, then landed awkwardly on his broken arm and whimpered.

'Oh, damn... that hurts...'

The toothy chest hovered in the air for a couple of moments, as if bewildered, then slowly turned to face him.

Sunny sighed, then picked himself up from the floor and tried to stand up.

His first attempt failed.

Gritting his teeth and hiding how much pain he was currently experiencing, Sunny threw a furious glance at the creature and growled:

"Come here, you bastard!"

With that, he used the Cruel Sight to help himself stand up, and then pointed the spear at the creature.

The chest tilted to the side.

'How come... it seems as though the bastard is grinning? How can a chest even grin?'

But there was no mistaking it — the abomination was mocking him. It became especially apparent after a grating, high-pitched giggle escaped from somewhere inside it.

The sound of it was so offensive, both to Sunny's pride and his ears, that he would rather have his arm broken all over again than listen to it.

'Funny, is it?'

Sunny smiled, then unhurriedly lowered the spear...

And thrust it into one of the thick brown vines sprawled on the floorboards in front of him.

The abomination's giggle abruptly stopped.

It froze and stared at Sunny, as if utterly stunned.

...And then trembled.

'Not so funny now, huh?'

A moment later, the entire ship trembled, too.

Chapter 422: Rude Awakening | Shadow Slave

Whatever it was that slumbered in the cargo hold of the ancient ship did not like one of its vines being damaged, let alone having its soul cut by a sharp blade. As the whole wreck trembled, a strong gust of warm, pungent wind hit Sunny in the back, tousling his hair. The air became even murkier than it had been before.

The chest creature froze, staring at him with something that resembled a mortified expression. Even its tongue stopped swaying in the air and retreated back under the pile of golden coins.

Now, it was Sunny's turn to grin. An evil gleam appeared in his eyes. Retrieving the Cruel Sight, he said:

"Goodness gracious. How clumsy of me."

The abomination lingered for a few moments, gave him a hateful look, and turned slightly toward to door of the treasury. Then, however, it halted.

'Don't tell me...'

Faced with the terrible danger of facing the awakened master of the wreck, the creature was still hesitating. The prey was right in front of it...

To Sunny's misfortune, he and the bizarre monstrosity shared one fundamental character flaw.

Both were very, very greedy.

Before he could even blink, the abomination suddenly turned back and lunged at him with a shrill giggle rumbling from somewhere in the depths of it. All Sunny could do was spend more essence and use Shadow Step again, appearing on the spot where the creature had been a second ago.

As he slipped on the debris of the shattered door and fell, the abomination shot through the air and crushed into the wall of the corridor, pulverizing

the wooden boards and getting entangled in the vines covering them. It huffed and puffed, then tried to extricate itself from the mess of glistening vines.

...However, they wouldn't let go.

In fact, as Sunny watched in horror, the whole corridor moved. The reddish-brown mass that it was overgrown with rippled, and the thick vines crawled toward the trapped creature, long thorns suddenly appearing on their vernicose surface.

The abomination giggled again, this time nervously, and doubled its efforts to free itself, slashing at the vines with its talons and biting into them with its terrifying teeth. As sickeningly pungent juice flowed into its maw, the creature shuddered.

'Crap, crap, crap...'

Turning on his stomach, Sunny lunged himself forward and rolled into the treasury. Here, there were no vines and no moss, only two empty chests and a scattering of gold coins gleaming on the floor.

As he hesitated, thinking of what to do next, something crashed with a deafening noise in the corridor behind him, and a moment later, the tall silhouette of the gaunt monstrosity appeared in the doorway.

Sunny's eyes widened, and he brandished the Cruel Sight, preparing to defend himself.

The abomination, however, did not pay him any attention anymore. Jumping over Sunny, it landed in the middle of the armored compartment... and then ran as fast as it could toward the breach in the back wall.

Without stopping even for a second, it reached the breach and dove through it, escaping the awakening wreck. Sunny followed its escape with his eyes, and then blinked.

'...Huh.'

Then, his gaze fell on the floor of the treasury.

The coins were still there, glinting in the bright sunlight. They didn't disappear or dissipate after the creature had run away. The coins... were real.

'They're real...'

As the ancient ship shook and trembled, and the mass of vines crawled toward the treasury, Sunny gritted his teeth and lunged toward the coins, grabbing them and pushing them into his pack.

'Real, they're real...'

He was in such a hurry to gather all the coins that he even cut himself slightly on the piece of mirror that was still stored in the pack.

"Ouch!"

'If these coins are real... then the rest of them inside that damned chest are real, too.'

Perhaps there weren't as many as he had thought, since the chest turned out to have a false... everything, but just the top layer that was visible to the naked eyes had to contain a thousand or more coins, at least.

As Sunny hunted down the last shiny golden disk left in the treasury, his attention was elsewhere.

It was concentrated on his shadow — the one he had hidden in the abomination's own shade when it jumped over him. Now, the shadow was following the bizarre creature as it ran toward the edge of the island, its gangly arms swaying in the air.

Sunny expected it to be assaulted by the Sailor Dolls, but the menacing wood wraiths seemed to be retreating from the wreck themselves. Some even dropped to the ground, turning back into piles of debris.

...The ground was moving.

'Well, what do you know...'

He thought that the Dolls learned to fall apart and reassemble themselves as a way to combat the Crushing, since many Nightmare Creatures on the Isles had adapted to its harsh reality in one way or another... but maybe, this peculiar ability had initially been just the means to hide themselves from the being that inhabited the wreck.

In any case, he couldn't let the chest escape. Not when a thousand shadow fragments were hidden inside the abominable thing!

Palming the last coin, Sunny threw the pack over his shoulder, then picked up the Cruel Sight and stood up. A determined expression appeared on his face.

The abomination was already halfway to the edge of the island.

"Where are you running, bastard?"

Diving into the shadows, he expended a large burst of essence and appeared out of his own shadow right in front of the creature. Since he could only use one hand now, the weapon Memory had turned back into a shortsword.

Before the abomination could react, the Cruel Sight lashed out and bit it into its thigh. The silver blade went all the way through, escaping from the back of it in a rain of black blood.

The chest let out a startled shriek... and then the monstrosity tumbled to the ground, rolling over its head and sending pieces of moss and mud flying into the air. The force of its crash was so fearsome that the ground trembled.

Or... was there another reason?

Before Sunny could do anything, brown vines shot from under the moss, wrapping themselves around the body of the bizarre abomination.

One of them, however, slid around his leg instead.

Chapter 423: Risk and Reward

'Not good...'

The vine wasn't as large as some of the ones Sunny had seen back on the ancient ship, but it was still as thick as a man's arm, with curved black thorns protruding from its glistening surface.

The vine brought the sickeningly sweet smell with it.

Sunny hacked at it with the Cruel Sight, but barely managed to break the vine's skin. As a fine aerosol of aromatic juice shot into the air, the damned thing moved.

His eyes widened.

The vine easily shredded the leather boot of the Puppeteer's Shroud, as if the Awakened armor of the fifth Tier was made out of tissue paper. Before the sharp thorns could saw off his foot, however, Sunny cursed and brought the Cruel Sight down once more, this time augmenting the silver blade with both of his shadows.

The shortsword hacked through the vine, severing the stretch of it that was wrapped around Sunny's leg. The rest of it didn't like being cut one bit: surging forward, it aimed at his torso. Several more appeared from beneath the most at shot at Sunny, too.

However, now that nothing was holding him, he could finally use Shadow Step again. Before the vines reached his body, Sunny turned into a shadow. Safe and sound in their tranquil embrace of the darkness... for now, at least... he slid a few meters away and stared at the struggling abomination.

The creature was entangled by several thick vines, which moved across its body, leaving bloody trails on it. Sparks flew as the black thorns scraped fruitlessly across the adamantine surface of the wooden chest, though. It seemed to be much tougher than the rest of the creature's body.

The monstrosity gathered its limbs underneath it, then pushed with all its might, trying to stand up. An angry shriek escaped from its maw.

The vines were trying to hold it down, but either they were much weaker here, far away from the wreck, or the abomination was much stronger than Sunny had thought. It raised to its knees, then lashed out with its talons, ripping two of the vines apart.

Suddenly liberated, the monstrosity crawled from underneath the remaining vines, and then dashed toward the edge of the island on all fours.

Sunny hissed.

'Crap!'

Why couldn't it just lay still and die?!

He escaped the shadow and ran after the unreasonably swift abomination... but it was too late.

Just a few moments later, the bizarre creature reached the very edge of the island and jumped off of it without slowing even for a moment. The lid of the chest clicked close as it plummeted down.

"What the hell!"

Sunny reached the edge a few seconds later and froze as he looked down.

A grim expression appeared on his face.

Some distance below, a gargantuan heavenly chain escaped from the mouth of a stone structure similar to the one Sunny had seen on the other side of the island. This one was slightly different, though, mainly because both of the massive stone pillars had broken and collapsed a long time ago.

...The chain itself was different, too.

Sunny had never seen such a thing on the Chained Isles. It seemed... sick, somehow. Weakened. The chain was covered in rust, its iron links dim and lifeless, robbed of their usual sense of indestructible stability.

This one was rather long, stretching for good ten kilometers or so into the distance. Because the Shipwreck Island continued to descend, it was slightly angled upward. Sunny could see a relatively small isle on the other end of the chain, far into the distance.

...And everywhere in between, grotesque Chain Worms were crawling all over the weakened heavenly chain.

Not that Sunny saw them alive, he understood that he had underestimated just how disturbing these creatures were. With their long serpentine tails, human-like torsos, and long muzzles that brimmed with dagger-like fangs, the demons looked like misshapen maggots devouring the dying chain.

...Or maybe it was already dead, and they were simply feasting on its corpse.

Some were thin like the one Sunny had seen before, some engorged on the rusty iron and bloated beyond any reasonable measure, towering above the damaged chain like small hills of flesh. The scales on the latter ones looked like they were now made out of steel, and shined as they reflected the sunlight. Those who had not satiated their hunger yet were much thinner and flew around, resembling giant metal dragonflies.

'...Crap.'

The damned chest creature landed directly on the rusted heavenly chain, gathered its long limbs, and dashed away from the Shipwreck Island, swaying dangerously as it went. From time to time, it fell to all fours and launched itself into the air, jumping from one link to another.

It wasn't long before the bizarre abomination encountered a Chain Worm. The winged creature lunged at it... only to be kicked in the muzzle and have one of its wings ruthlessly torn apart.

The chest creature tossed the maimed Chain Worm back toward the island, where its body was suddenly grabbed by a long root that lazily extended from the darkness of the Dark Side, then disappeared from view.

The abomination took in the terrible sight, giggled, then turned around, and continued running away.

Sunny hesitated.

His prize was getting away. But...

The small island he could see in the distance had to be the Twisted Rock — the isle directly bordering the Tear. There would be no more land to escape to if he went there.

And the only chain that connected Twisted Rock to the Chained Isles was currently being devoured by the demonic Worms. It didn't seem to be on the verge of collapse just yet, however... how would Sunny know? It's not like he had seen a heavenly chain break before.

Perhaps it was time to give up on his pursuit and turn back.

He lingered on the very edge of the island, sensing brown vines crawling closer and closer.

Risk it all or retreat and lose the chance to get his hands on the miraculous treasure forever? Nephis was about to become a devil in just a few days...

No matter what decision he was going to make, he had to make it right now.

In the end, Sunny had to silence his avarice and consider the situation objectively. Going after the bizarre abomination posed a huge risk... but it also promised a huge reward.

In the end, what made him decide was not greed, emotions, or even rational thought. It was his intuition.

For whatever reason, Sunny felt a strong aversion to the idea of turning back. It was as though Twisted Rock exerted an invisible pull on him,

drawing him closer. He had never experienced something like this, at least not to this degree.

He knew that his intuition was not a simple thing. It was connected to the [Fated] Attribute and the special properties his eyes had inherited from Weaver. Somehow, Sunny was capable of perceiving the trembling of the strings of fate around him, from time to time.

Considering how strong his intuition was pushing him toward the Twisted Rock, something out there had to be of utmost importance to his fate, or at least have a connection to it.

'...Fine. Let's get those coins!'

With a grim expression, Sunny summoned the Dark Wing and dove into the empty abyss of the skies.

Chapter 424: Unlucky Streak | Shadow Slave

Sunny glided through the skies, tensely observing the underside of the Shipwreck Island through the eyes of his shadow. The chain ahead of him was teeming with a swarm of Fallen Demons, but behind him... he didn't even want to know what the thing hiding in the darkness was.

One thing became clear, though, and it was why none of the Chain Worms had tried to devour the iron giant that swayed in the wreckage of a broken heavenly chain... or rather, had succeeded in trying to bite a piece out of him. The dead colossus was like cheese in the mousetrap, attracting these vile creatures into the range at which the being that dwelled in the perpetual darkness could catch them.

Sunny was sure that many Chain Worms had attempted to feast on the iron giant, but ended up being the feast instead.

Currently, he was trying to avoid the same fate.

Luckily, the Dark Wing allowed him to glide diagonally away from the Shipwreck Island instead of plunging straight down, avoiding the attack range of the terrifying being. He reached the chain without attracting the attention of the bottom dweller, and instantly became a shadow, hiding on its underside.

Waiting for a few moments, Sunny studied the length of the heavenly tether in front of him.

'...Not too bad.'

A large section of the unusually long chain hung low, reaching the Sky Below. He would be able to ride most of it without being noticed by the Chain Worms. The last stretch of it, though... Sunny was going to have to use Shadow Step to jump from shadow to shadow if he wanted to avoid having to fight a swarm of the Fallen Demons.

The problem was that his reserves of shadow essence were already running low. Except for the short walk across the hull of the ancient ship, Sunny had no chance to really replenish it. In the meantime, he had used a lot to get to the wreck, fight the damnable chest abomination, and pursue it. Chances were, he would reach the Twisted Rock with no essence to spare whatsoever.

How was he even going to kill the vile chest, especially with one of his arms broken?

He hesitated for a bit, then rushed forward, swiftly reaching the section of the chain submerged into the Sky Below and continuing to fly through the darkness once there. To avoid tempting fate, Sunny remained on the underside of the gargantuan tether, where there were way fewer Worms crawling around.

He did, however, encounter several, and saw up close how they were tearing into the rusting iron of the chain as he silently flew past. The sight of it was simultaneously disturbing, fascinating... and strangely sad.

'All things must come to an end, I guess...'

Even as seemingly eternal as the miraculous heavenly chains.

...Soon, he caught up with the chest creature and followed it from the shadows. The bizarre monstrosity was still running as fast as it could, jumping from link to link and using its long gangly limbs to keep balance. From time to time, it got into a short and vicious fight with one of the Chain Worms and either left them severely wounded, or promptly escaped with a ghastly wound or two of its own. By now, its grating giggles grew somewhat miserable, as well as menacingly angry.

Sunny observed its fighting habits, thinking about how to deal with it best.

At the same time, he was meticulously calculating the amount of shadow essence he would have to spend to cross the last section of the way to the Twisted Rock, trying to find a way to keep his reserves as high as possible.

...His calculations, thought, had turned out to be for naught.

When both Sunny and the chest monstrosity were about halfway to the small island, a dreadful sound reached their ears.

It was the rattling of the chain.

Sunny froze for a moment, then glanced toward the goal of this journey.

'Oh, no...'

The Twisted Rock had entered its ascent phase, and was now rising quickly into the sky.

'Curse it all!'

Sunny remembered thinking that he was in luck today, and couldn't help but growl... mentally, of course, since he had no vocal cords currently.

Where the hell was this supposed luck?!

The fact that the Twisted Rock was ascending meant two things for him.

One was that he would have to act fast and try to kill the chest creature before the Crushing became too terrible, or somehow obliterate the damned thing while being weighed down by it.

The second was that the position of the heavenly chain was swiftly shifting, making it so that the stretch of it submerged into the Sky Below was becoming shorter and shorter.

This meant that he would have to spend much more essence to reach the island without attracting the attention of the swarm of Chain Worms. And he didn't have a lot of essence to spare, to begin with...

'Damn it!'

As the angle of the chain increased and the bizarre monstrosity swayed, then fell on all fours and rushed forward even faster, Sunny tried to deal with the resentment growing in his heart and followed it.

'...Was my intuition wrong?'

Things didn't seem too good for him right now.

Soon, the two of them emerged from the darkness of the Sky Below and saw the sunlight again. The chest creature seemed indifferent to it, but to Sunny, it was an ill omen.

Out here in the sunlit expanse of the Sky Above, the heavenly chain was not covered in an uninterrupted layer of shadows anymore. That meant that he couldn't move through it unobstructed. Instead, Sunny had to either step from one shadow to another, if they were close enough, or send his own forward and make use of it to jump over long stretches of brightly lit parts of the heavenly tether.

'Damn it...'

Knowing that there was no other choice now, Sunny burned through his essence in order to not fall behind the rushing monstrosity.

Soon, his reserves grew dangerously low. It was still enough to reach the Twisted Rock... probably... but once there, he would have to fight while both of his cores were nearly empty.

That meant no bursts of speed, strength, and resilience that he had already gotten used to.

No access to active enchantment like the [Dark Mirror].

No more using Shadow Step to escape dangerous situations, at least for a while.

...And added to all that, one of his arms was broken and completely useless.

Oh, and there was also the Crushing.

If Sunny had teeth in his shadow form — or a mouth, for that matter — he would have gritted them right now. Full of dark emotions, he thought:

'...Doesn't matter. I'm getting these coins even if it kills me!'

Chapter 425: Twisted Rock | Shadow Slave

Soon, the vile creature drew close to the Twisted Rock. It crouched near the vertical stone wall of the floating island, giggled, and then suddenly shot upward, jumping no less than twenty meters high. Its talons pierced the weathered stone, and the abomination nimbly climbed up, soon disappearing from view.

Far below, on the rusted surface of the damaged heavenly chain, a hunched human figure suddenly appeared from the deep shadows.

Sunny felt the chain sway as the island rose higher and higher, then looked up with a dark expression.

In this direction, Twisted Rock was the last piece of land before the empty expanse of the Tear. It also only had one iron tether connecting it to the rest of the Chained Isles, so now that the bizarre monstrosity was up there, it had nowhere else to run.

With a pained grimace, Sunny summoned the Moonlight Shard, cut one of the straps off his pack, then tied it around his neck to create a makeshift sling for his broken arm. He was going to have to set the bones and make a proper splint later, but for now, this was going to have to do.

With his arm secured and cradled against his chest, Sunny waited a few seconds for the sharp pain to subside, then activated the Dark Wing and used the Prowling Thorn to fly up the overhanging slope of the stone island.

The dragonfly cloak only allowed him to levitate if there was a surface beneath it to support the enchantment. If there wasn't, he was only able to slowly glide down instead of falling without any control. So, to travel up, he had to either push off of something or pull himself toward something. The Prowling Thorn made that process easier.

Due to the burden of the early stages of the Crushing, Sunny had to exert more strength than usual to propel himself upward. After using the heavy

kunai to do so several times, he finally crested the edge of the Twisted Rock and soared a few meters above it.

The Twisted Rock... was a dreadful and miserable place.

The island was rather small, and all of its surface was nothing but an uneven expanse of dark stone. That stone, however, looked really strange. It was as if once, a long time ago, it had been melted by unimaginable heat and then abruptly solidified again, creating strange shapes and swirls.

...Here and there, blackened bones protruded from the molten stone, telling the tale of countless humans and beasts who had drowned in that scorching inferno. The sight of them was eerie and disturbing, like something torn from the actual hell.

Thrown down by the Crushing, Sunny landed heavily on the dark stone and swayed, then supported himself with the shaft of the Cruel Sight.

His graceless arrival made enough noise to attract the attention of the chest fiend, who was crouched a dozen or so meters away.

The creature froze, then turned around and faced him.

Sunny scowled.

...A mangled corpse of a Chain Worm was hanging from beneath the half-closed lid of the chest. As the creature turned, the tail and claws of the dead Fallen Demon scraped across the molten stone.

The bizarre abomination stared at Sunny for a few moments, then opened its maw and swallowed the remainder of the Chain Worm whole. Despite the fact that the demon was at least five times bigger than the chest that served the fiend as the head, it somehow disappeared inside without leaving a trace. The creature licked the blood off its sharp teeth and giggled.

This time, its laugh sounded rather hateful.

A cold smile appeared on Sunny's lips.

"Right back at you, bastard."

As the fiend rose to its feet, towering above Sunny menacingly at full three meters of height, the Cruel Sight shifted and turned into a somber shortsword. Its silver blade gleamed, seemingly absorbing the bright sunlight.

The heavenly chain rattled below, and as its rusted links scraped against each other, the Twisted Rock continued to ascend.

The smile disappeared from Sunny's face.

Staring at the gluttonous abomination, he couldn't help but feel a bit of fear. The thing was tall, fast, and incredibly strong... much stronger than he was, especially now that his reserves of shadow essence were almost completely drained. Despite the fact that it was heavily wounded, both by his sword and by the claws of the Chain Worms, it still appeared agile, vigorous, and full of murderous spite.

However, this fight was not going to be as suicidal as it might have seemed. There were three main reasons why Sunny felt confident in his chances of defeating the bizarre abomination.

The first one was hanging on a thread tied around his neck. It was a beautiful amulet in the form of a crimson flower... the Blood Blossom.

The fiend was bleeding heavily from the deep cut on its thigh, which had been left there by the sharp blade of the Cruel Sight, and from a multitude of ugly wounds delivered to the gaunt body of the monstrosity by the Chain Worms it had fought while traversing the heavenly chain.

The more black blood flowed from those wounds, the more the morbid charm Memory enhanced both the Puppeteer's Shroud and the Cruel Sight, as well as any other Memory Sunny would want to use.

The second reason was rather simple, and it was the fundamental difference between the two of them. The abomination might have been stronger and faster than Sunny, but it lacked his combat skill and insight. As long as the gap in power was not absolutely overwhelming, a polished technique could turn the tide of any battle. More than that, fighting things that were bigger and more powerful than him was more or less Sunny's specialty by now.

However, the third reason was the most important, and the one he hoped to exploit the most.

Yes, the fiend was stronger than Sunny... but it was also much, much larger and heavier than him. That meant that it was going to be affected by the Crushing much more. No matter how bad it was going to get for Sunny, it was going to be many times worse for the towering abomination.

Out here on the Chained Isles, being small and lithe was sometimes a great advantage.

Feeling the burden of the Crushing pressing down on him more and more, Sunny raised his sword and aimed it at the bizarre fiend.

'...Let's see which one of us is going to break first.'

Chapter 426: Most Terrible Battle

The fiend shifted its weight, then lunged forward with a shrill giggle. It was terrifyingly powerful and fast, but because its movements were clearly telegraphed, Sunny had plenty of time to react.

Diving under the long arm of the abomination, he narrowly avoided being torn apart by the sharp talons and lashed out with the Cruel Sight. As the silver blade bit into the abdomen of the creature, piercing its tough skin just under the ribs, he continued forward and spun.

Just a split second later, Sunny was already behind the enemy.

...However, he wasn't safe.

Without pausing ever for a moment, the bizarre monstrosity pressed its hands against the ground and then kicked back with both legs. There was enough power in that strike to shatter a small hill, but Sunny was already moving, getting out of range.

He had not observed how the fiend fought against the Chained Worms for nothing. He knew that the wretched thing could use all four of its limbs to attack, and that its joints seemed to be able to bend in any direction. Not only did he know what the abomination was capable of, he also knew what it liked and tended to do.

He also knew where it was most vulnerable, and where none of his weapons would be able to do any harm. That's why he had aimed for its gaunt body instead of the much larger and obvious target — the chest itself.

Sunny had always been very perceptive, and practicing Shadow Dance only sharpened his ability to observe and understand such things. Maybe it was thanks to that that he had managed to learn so much about the fiend so fast.

As the soles of his boots scraped against the dark stone, a fleeting thought passed through his mind:

'How would it feel to shadow a Nightmare Creature... I wonder...'

Then, he had no more time for unnecessary thoughts.

Crushing through blackened bones, the abomination bent its joints in the opposite direction of where they were supposed to turn, spun, and lunged at him once again. This time, it was moving on all fours, the lid of the chest serving as its lower jaw. That made it almost impossible for him to dodge out of the way.

...Sunny had no idea why the golden coins weren't spilling out, but luckily, they seemed to be held in place by some strange force.

Unable to use his maimed arm to help himself keep balance, he had no choice but to jump down and roll under the attacking fiend. The Cruel Sight flashed again, leaving a deep cut on the leg of the creature. At the same time, a pulse of sharp pain radiated through Sunny's entire body... even though he took care to protect his broken bones, he couldn't keep them from scraping against one another completely.

But the worse pain was still to come.

'That is going to hurt...'

Sunny had already known that he would not be able to get back to his feet before the next attack came. Due to the fact that the abomination would have to perform it from an awkward position, it was not going to be as devastating as the previous blows. The Crushing had also become considerable enough to slow down both of their movements...

But those long and sharp talons were absolutely deadly even if there was not much force behind them.

As the fiend pivoted and snapped one of its limbs in his direction, Sunny sent both of his shadows from his body to encompass the Puppeteer's Shroud. A moment later, the talons slashed across his torso... and slid from the lusterless black leather of the chest guard without piercing it.

The strike itself, however, was still powerful enough to throw Sunny flying back. He counted on that, though, and used the momentum to create distance between himself and the vile creature. Landing on his feet, Sunny suppressed a groan and brandished the Cruel Sight once again.

As the heavenly chain rattled, Twisted Rock rose even higher, and the burden of the Crushing suddenly pressed him down even more.

Some time later, Sunny was on the verge of passing out from exhaustion and pain.

"Argh! Curse you!"

He staggered back and hunched over, using the shaft of the Cruel Sight to keep himself standing upright. His breath was ragged and pained, and drops of both sweat and blood were rolling down his face.

Things... were not going great.

For the both of them, actually.

The ferocious clash between himself and the vile giggling fiend had gone for much longer than either of them had ever expected. After the first few minutes, it had become apparent that neither one could easily kill the other.

Sunny was too devious and slippery to be caught by the bizarre creature, and the damned chest monster was too vigorous and resilient to succumb to the dozens of shallow wounds that Sunny had delivered to it. What's worse, all of its vital organs seemed to be hidden inside the chest, which was nearly indestructible.

It was the most terrible battle of all...

A battle between two cockroaches!

As the result, their fight lasted for a simply stupid amount of time.

By now, both were in rough shape. Sunny was almost dead from exhaustion, bleeding from several ugly wounds, and in a world of pain. The abomination looked even worse. Its gaunt body seemed to have gone through a meat grinder, and its long tongue was hanging lifelessly over the edge of the chest, not even trying to move.

Neither was ready to give up, though.

The fiend panted heavily and stared at Sunny. Then, it giggled once again. This time, the giggle sounded tired, slightly bewildered... but mostly full of searing hatred.

The bastard really, really wanted to rip Sunny to shreds now.

Staggering forward, it tried to swipe at him with one hand, but crashed heavily to the ground instead. Lying there motionlessly, the bizarre creature let out a despondent growl.

The Crushing was almost unbearable by now. Sunny wasn't sure that he would be able to withstand it for much longer, so the abomination had to be having an extremely rough time, too. In fact, it was certainly being tortured by the oppressive force much more. Very soon, both of them were going to be completely immobilized.

He just had to kill it before that happened.

Not sure that he would be able to take another step, Sunny extended the Cruel Sight to its full length and thrust it forward. The silver blade pierced the skin of the fiend, causing more black blood to seep out.

'Good... bleed to death, you piece of crap!'

He could feel the enhancement of the Blood Blossom become a tiny bit stronger, but at this point, it was already meaningless. The charm was just an Awakened Memory of the second tier, after all. Whatever boost it could provide was not that substantial when dealing with Fallen Nightmare Creatures and Ascended weapons, especially past the point where the incremental increases in its potency were truly substantial.

The abomination tried to dodge the attack, but failed to move fast enough due to the merciless pressure of the Crushing. It tried to stand up... but failed.

A grim smile appeared on Sunny's face.

'Got you...'

His enemy, it seemed, was now completely helpless. But Sunny could still move... he could still attack... he had not even used any of the shadow essence that had been accumulating in his cores this whole time. The reserves weren't large, but there was some...

Retrieving his spear, he gathered his strength, and then thrust it forward again, delivering another wound to the bizarre creature. And then again, and then...

'Die, just die already...'

...And then, the fiend giggled mockingly, and suddenly gathered its limbs, which then disappeared into the bottom of the chest. A few seconds later, the whole body of the creature was out of sight, leaving only the adamantine, indestructible chest standing in the middle of the stone island. The tip of the spear scraped against the dark wood, not leaving even a scratch on it.

Sunny stared at it, dumbfounded.

Then, he let out a yelp, and as the power of the Crushing increased even further, fell to his knees.

"What the hell?! Come back here, you coward!"

His hands trembled from strain as he lifted the Cruel Sight and struck the chest once again, to no result whatsoever.

Sunny seemed to have overexerted himself with that last strike, because the spear fell out of his hands and plunged to the ground, striking the stone with

enough force to send a few cracks through it. Then, it bounced and rolled away, finally getting caught on a piece of bone about two meters away.

He stared at the Cruel Sight with a shocked expression, and then dismissed the Memory instead of trying to walk... or crawl... that far to retrieve it.

Sunny turned to the chest and gritted his teeth. A moment later, sparks of light appeared around his hand again.

"Don't think that it's over!"

The lid of the chest trembled, and then rose a bit. The creature clearly strained to achieve even that much.

A gloating, hateful giggle emerged from the depths of it a moment later.

...That was the exact moment when Sunny tossed a polished crimson gem that had appeared in his hand toward the chest. Just a split second after the Broken Oath flew inside the abomination's maw, the lid snapped close, pressed down by the obliterating force of the Crushing.

A muffled sound resounded from within the chest, but no matter how much the lid trembled, it didn't rise again.

Sunny fell to the ground and laughed, then groaned and whimpered as he arduously crawled a few meters away and finally grew still just outside of the Broken Oath's soul-destroying reach.

Laying there in complete exhaustion, unable to move anymore, Sunny grinned.

"Who's laughing now? Try to swallow that, you bastard..."

Chapter 427: Death of a Mimic

The Twisted Rock soared higher and higher into the sky, and as it did, a terrible crushing force assaulted the two living beings that were pressed into its surface, separated only by a dozen meters of dark stone.

The large adamantine chest did not look too good. The wood was slowly losing its color, the strips of metal reinforcing it showed growing patches of rust. It seemed as though the creature was struck by some terrible disease. In a sense, it was... after all, the Broken Oath was currently destroying its soul bit by little bit.

Sunny did not look that much better, though.

He was laying on the hard stone, looking at the merciless skies, struggling to breathe and endure the pain. His armor was soaked in blood, and his broken arm was pressed tightly against his chest. His face was deathly pale, almost the same color as the tall and majestic Ivory Tower that floated high above the world, shrouded in the whitest of clouds.

Every breath was a torture.

Sunny knew that he was not going to bleed to death because of the Blood Weave, but the wounds still needed to be tended to. His broken bones, especially, were in need of attention. This Crushing was turning out to be tragically long, though, not giving him the chance to do so.

Well, that was not a surprise.

The single chain connecting the Twisted Rock to the rest of the Isles was much longer than most, which meant that the small island was going to rise very, very high. Higher than Sunny had ever been in this strange and deadly land.

The Crushing was not only going to last longer, but would also be vastly more terrible than the few previous times he had experienced it. By now,

the hours of hardship he had endured together with Master Roan several days ago seemed like a pleasant walk in the park.

Now, it seemed as though he was being slowly crushed under the weight of the entirety of heaven.

Sunny was only alive because he didn't have to hide his powers anymore, and could use all of his abilities without restraint. Unlike on the day he had met the dashing griffin rider, both shadows were now tightly wrapped around his body, augmenting its resilience threefold. For that reason, he had not turned into a puddle of bloody goo yet. Although it certainly felt as though he was getting close...

If things became really unbearable, he could still escape into the shadows and either wait out the worst part of the Crushing or try to escape back to the heavenly chain before his shadow essence ran out. Since he had spent this whole time patiently circulating it through the coils of the Soul Serpent, there was a considerable amount flowing through his cores by now.

He had also spent this whole time waiting for the damn chest fiend to finally die, as well as considering his options on how to transport the gold coins back to the Sanctuary of Noctis.

Since it had turned out that only the upper layer of the treasure pile was real, he now had much more options... however, all of them required him to burn through a lot of essence to cross back through the swarm of Chain Worms. The problem was confounded by the fact that Twisted Rock was going to be destroyed soon, which meant that he could not risk making several trips to the Citadel and back. He had to carry his spoils away while the island was still attached to the rest of the Chained Isles.

For that reason, Sunny was trying to endure as much of the Crushing as he could before turning into a shadow.

...He also did not forget about the strange way his intuition had reacted to the dying island. Before the burden of the Crushing became too overbearing, he had sent one of his shadows to scour the whole place in

search of anything that might have been important enough to affect the strings of fate.

However, there was literally nothing on the Twisted Rock except for barren stone and ancient, blackened bones. The shadow explored every nook and cranny of this miserable place, only to find nothing at all.

He had even sent it to take a look at the underside of the small isle, but it was as empty and desolate as the rest of it.

Sunny was left very confused by that turn of events. He was certain that there was nowhere on the Twisted Rock that he had failed to search. And yet, there was nothing on the island to cause his intuition to react so strongly. What was going on? Had he failed to notice something, or was he mistaken about the whole thing, to begin with?

Sadly, after a while, the Crushing had become too terrible for him to endure without the help of the second shadow, so he had to call it back.

And now, here they were.

A sudden sound attracted Sunny's attention. Glancing sideways, he noticed that a crack had appeared on the surface of the adamantine chest. Black blood seeped out of it, soon turning into a stream. A few seconds later, a second crack appeared near the first.

He would have smiled if not for the fact that even such a simple action was rather strenuous now, this high above the Sky Below.

'It's not going to be too long now...'

A few minutes later, there was a pool of black blood surrounding the large wooden chest.

Sunny endured the pain and counted the seconds.

Before he reached a thousand, the vile creature trembled slightly and giggled one last time, its grating voice full of doleful outrage. Then, the bizarre monstrosity shuddered and grew absolutely still.

It was finally dead!

Sunny couldn't help but grin slightly.

'Finally... all those coins... are mine!'

As the heavenly chain rattled and groaned, the voice of the Spell resounded above the hellish stone island. Its words sounded like music to his ears...

[You have slain a Fallen Devil, Mordant Mimic.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

[...You have received a Memory.]

Chapter 428: Covetous Coffers | Shadow Slave

Despite the torturous burden of the Crushing, Sunny couldn't help but feel jubilant. Not only did he receive eight shadow fragments and a powerful Memory, he had also defeated a Fallen Devil all by himself, without even Saint providing him any help.

The Black Knight, too, had been a Fallen Devil. So killing one solo meant a lot to Sunny. It was a poignant milestone that made him feel like all his hard work and all the vile things he had gone through were not for nothing. He was accomplishing his goal.

Growing stronger.

...Of course, the Mordant Mimic was not as terrifying of a foe in battle as the guardian of the ruined cathedral had been. One was a creature that seemed to have been created solely for combat, while the other mostly relied on deceit and ambushing its prey to achieve victory. And yet, the chest fiend was by no means an easy foe. If anything, its devilish nature only made it that much more dangerous.

'Argh!'

As the Twisted Rock rose higher, the Crushing struck at Sunny with even more dreadful force, making his mirth dissipate in a wave of miserable suffering. A muffled groan escaped from his lips.

'Endure... just endure a bit more... this hell is going to end soon.'

For now, he had no choice but to keep suffering, wait, and stare at the distant silhouette of the Ivory Tower.

The beautiful pagoda seemed so close now that he could almost imagine himself reaching out and encompassing it in his fist.

With nothing else to do, Sunny summoned the runes and found the familiar cluster out of habit:

Shadow Fragments: [223/2000].

'I wonder how many coins are in that damned chest...'

Would he be able to create the third core with their help?

Shifting his gaze, Sunny found the runes describing his Memories. A new one was now shown at the end of the list.

His eyes glistened slightly as he concentrated on it and read the description:

Memory: [Covetous Coffe].

Memory Rank: Ascended.

Memory Tier: IV.

'Huh...'

Sunny really couldn't believe his fortune. This was the second Ascended Memory of the fourth tier that he had acquired in a span of just a few days. Even without considering the main boon of the expedition — the miraculous coins — this journey had already proved to be incredibly fruitful.

But what kind of a Memory would the bizarre carnivorous chest leave behind?

Curious, he read on.

Memory Type: Tool.

'A utility Memory!'

While not as showy as armors and weapons, utility Memories were the foundation of every Awakened's arsenal. Take Sunny, for example — some of his most precious Memories were tools. Endless Spring, Ordinary Rock, Silver Bell... even Weaver's Mask.

Excited, he tried to forget about the obliterating pressure of the Crushing and concentrate on the runes.

Memory Description: ["You are very strange!" said Noctis. Why was his new friend so deathly afraid of chests? Why was he so timid and pale? "Don't be afraid, these are just my treasure chests. They won't bite. Well... except for this one. This one will eat you alive."]

Sunny blinked.

'That... is interesting.'

So Noctis of the Sanctuary of Noctis was a person, after all. What's more, he or she had apparently been in possession of several treasure chests, including one that could eat people alive.

Had the Mordant Mimic once been a pet of this Noctis? If so...

What kind of a person would keep a Fallen Devil as a pet?

Suddenly full of dread, Sunny continued to read.

Memory Enchantments: [Mendacious Coffin], [Capacious Chest], [Locomotive Chifonnier], [Lurid Trunk].

Sunny stared at the runes with a deadpan expression.

'What... do all these words... even mean?'

Struggling to understand the names of the enchantments, he wondered if the Spell was having a stroke and shifted his gaze to the descriptions.

[Mendacious Coffin] Enchantment Description: "This Memory can mimic the form of any inanimate object. The size and intricacy of the simulacrum are dependent on the wielder's Soul Core capacity."

'Makes sense. I am sure that the Mimic only assumed the form of a chest, instead of being born... created?... as one. I wonder what kind of a shape I can currently manage, though.'

He studied the runes again:

[Capacious Chest] Enchantment Description: "This Memory is bigger on the inside. It can be summoned and dismissed while storing inanimate items. The size of the storage space, as well as the maximum weight of stored items, are dependent on the wielder's Soul Core capacity."

Sunny suppressed the desire to grin.

'Yes!'

This was exactly what he needed right now. This enchantment solved the exact problem he was facing — the need to carry all the gold coins away before Twisted Rock was destroyed. Once again, luck was on his side!

But that wasn't all. The ability to store items in the Covetous Coffin, and then store the Coffin in his Soul Sea, opened up a sea of possibilities. In a sense, it was just like Effie's incredible bag, but better — the bag had to be carried around if there was anything inside of it, while the Coffin could be stashed away until needed.

And if so... could Sunny bring items from the Dream Realm to the real world with its help? He couldn't wait to find out.

Thinking of all the money he would make, Sunny turned his attention to the remaining enchantments:

[Locomotive Chiffonnier] Enchantment Description: [This Memory can move around and follow its wielder.]

'...Nice! That will solve the problem of having to carry all the items if I store too much inside. They are still going to weigh a ton, after all.'

[Lurid Trunk] Enchantment Description: "This Memory will protect itself against potential thieves. By eating them."

Sunny blinked.

'That is... a bit scary. I better remain on the good side of this bizarre Memory, huh?'

Overall, he was incredibly happy with the Covetous Coffers. This new utility Memory of his was simply fantastic! Not only was it capable of solving his current predicament, it would also make his future ventures into the Dream Realm much more comfortable and efficient. Not to mention the possibility of being able to bring soul shards into the real world with its help, and selling them there at a high price...

Soul shards meant money, and money meant being able to purchase Memories. With more Memories at his disposal, Sunny would be able to bring Saint to two hundred shadow fragments faster... which would hopefully make the two of them vastly more powerful.

Now, he just had to survive the Crushing.

...He was almost ready to give up and turn into a shadow when the heavenly chain finally drew taut, stopping the rise of the Twisted Rock. One more deafening rattle rolled through the air, and then, everything grew quiet.

The Crushing was at its peak now. Sunny was hurting terribly, but still able to withstand it. He just had to endure until the island entered the descent phase, and the pressure would slowly start to reduce.

Sunny strained his chest and drew in a hoarse breath.

'Thank gods...'

However, before he could feel any relief, the whole island suddenly shuddered, and a strange piercing noise assaulted his ears.

It sounded... it sounded like the sound of metal being torn apart.

Sunny's pupils widened.

'What... was that?!'

Chapter 429: Schism | Shadow Slave

A moment later, a deafening roar of massive iron links being torn apart rolled over the entire island, which then lurched up by a few meters and suddenly came to an abrupt stop.

Sunny yelped, feeling the Crushing assault him with even more obliterating force.

'The chain... the chain is failing!'

Why did it happen so soon?

For a few moments, he felt nothing but pure, bestial panic. Then, he forced himself to regain control over his mind and threw a desperate glance toward the not-so-distant edge of the Twisted Rock.

Would he be able to escape in time?

He lingered for a moment, then gritted his teeth and commanded one of the shadows to slide off his body onto the ground.

As soon as it did, a muffled scream escaped from his lips. It felt as though a giant hammer struck his body, making every bone in it shudder and groan. Sunny turned his head to the side and spat a mouthful of blood.

'Curse it all...'

The shadow flew to the edge of the island and slid over its edge, desperately trying to reach the dying chain.

...But it was too late.

As Sunny watched in horror, one of the links of the heavenly tether broke. Only one, the weakest of them all... but that was all it took.

'No!'

The chain that connected Twisted Rock to the rest of the Chained Isles snapped in two, and as ten kilometers of gargantuan iron links slowly fell toward the Sky Below, the island suddenly shot upward. Since it was still in the ascent phase, and now unrestrained by anything, the speed of its rise was simply terrifying.

'No, no, no!'

The Crushing struck at Sunny with such fury that he couldn't even scream. He felt himself being slowly broken, and feverishly tried to come up with a solution.

'Step through the shadows... jump down and try to glide to the Shipwreck Island...'

No, that would never work. There were more than ten kilometers separating these isles from one another, which was far outside the Dark Wing's capabilities. He could try to chase after the piece of the chain still connected to the Shipwreck Island, but chances of catching up with it were close to zero.

The length of the heavenly tether was falling deceitfully slow, but it was just an illusion caused by its colossal size. In truth, the torn end of it was flying through the air at tremendous speed, moving both down and away from the Twisted Rock.

The repulsive silhouettes of the gluttonous Chain Worms were growing smaller by the second.

Sunny was already late to rush in pursuit of it, and every moment that passed made the probability of success lower.

'Great! Goddamn great, you fool! You finally let your greed kill you!'

Sunny growled, full of fury at himself, but then suddenly stopped.

No, that didn't make any sense. He was not on this island because of greed. Even though Sunny had made several risky decisions in order to get to the

miraculous coins, at the end of it, standing on the edge of the Shipwreck Island, he put his avarice aside and made a sober choice.

He came here because his intuition had told him that something on the Twisted Rock was very important to his future.

But what was it?! There was nothing but stone and bones in this damned place!

What was he supposed to do? How was he supposed to survive?

Sunny tried to calm down and think. He summoned his shadow back, and briefly regained the ability to breathe.

It wasn't going to be for long, though. The Crushing was already overwhelming his physical ability to resist its lethal pressure. Sunny had a few dozen seconds, at most, before he would be forced to retreat into the shadows or die.

'Think... think... there has to be a way out. Hide inside the dead Mimic or the Covetous Coffin? No, the items inside the Memory maintain their weight, which means that they, too, will be affected by the Crushing. And even if not, what's the point? Even if the chest survives until the Twisted Rock itself is torn apart and plunges down into the Sky Below, I'll just be falling forever inside of a box instead of on my own... that's like dying inside of a coffin...'

And the Twisted Rock was going to be destroyed by the Crushing, inevitably and without a doubt. As it rose higher and higher, it was going to start to fall apart. When enough of it was destroyed to obliterate the mysterious force that kept the isles afloat, the remaining debris was going to fall down and eventually disappear into the Sky Below.

...Alongside what was going to remain of Sunny.

He lay motionlessly for a few seconds, then for a few seconds more. Another crack appeared on the corpse of the Mordant Mimic. Then, the stone beneath it cracked, too.

Sunny did not move at all.

The cracks on the stone widened and crawled in every direction.

A few moments later, a heavy sigh escaped from his lips.

Sunny had one last gamble left...

Gathering all of his strength, he groaned and pushed himself off the ground. Even though it felt as if he was lifting a mountain, and every muscle in his body trembled at the edge of bursting apart, he somehow managed to sit up.

Then, Sunny summoned Weaver's Mask.

After returning from the Forgotten Shore and deciding to create a separate persona to investigate the Sovereigns, as well as do all the things that Sunny didn't want to be associated with his name — the one which would then accidentally become known as the famous Lord Mongrel — he had decided to never use any of the equipment that it wielded if there was even the smallest chance of someone connecting him to the mysterious masked man.

But he had little choice right now.

His last hope was... fate. He knew that something had drawn him to the Twisted Rock, even though in the end he failed to find it. In the past, his intuition only reacted that strongly to the things that were connected to the gods, the Unknown... and Weaver. So, there was a high chance that Weaver's Mask would show him the way to salvation.

As the cool black wood caressed his skin, Sunny forced air into his lungs... and sent his shadow essence toward the mask.

He was going to do something that he dreaded doing for many months...

Activate the mysterious [??] enchantment of the divine Memory.

When the power of his soul poured into the Weaver's Mask, Sunny froze for a moment...

And then let out a horrible, inhuman scream.

Chapter 430: Tapestry of Fate

The moment Sunny's essence touched the black wooden surface of the divine Memory, Weaver's Mask suddenly reached into his very soul and hungrily drank more... and then more, and more, and more.

In a fraction of a second, all of his reserve of shadow essence was sucked dry, with only a tiny bit of it remaining... almost as if these pitiful drops were not even worth being consumed by the mask.

And even then, all it could achieve was activate the [??] enchantment for just a single moment.

...That single moment, however, was enough to almost drive Sunny insane.

Suddenly, a horrifying pain pierced his eyes and his mind, akin to the suffering he had experienced after consuming the Drop of Ichor, only so much worse.

Infinitely worse.

As he shrieked, all traces of intelligence disappearing from his voice, the world he saw changed.

Suddenly, all Sunny could see was an endless, beautiful eternity of twisting threads. Those threads transfixed everything in existence, connecting every living being and every object, every thought and every concept, every dream and every nightmare, stretching infinitely into every direction, as well as into the past, the present, and the future.

These were the Strings of Fate.

They were just like the threads of light that the Spell was woven of, but while the magnificent and inconceivably complex pattern that Sunny had seen twice in the empty void between dream and reality composed the function of the Spell, what he glimpsed right now connected... everything.

All of the universe as it had existed, was existing, and was going to exist.

...Much worse, when observing the weave of the Spell, Sunny could only sense and guess at its meaning. But the terrifying enchantment of Weaver's Mask not only allowed him to see the tapestry of Fate, but also forced the understanding of it onto him.

The knowledge of everything, everywhere, all at once...

Of course, such knowledge was too much for any human to endure. Just the tiniest, infinitesimal amount of it was enough to instantly destroy any living being... except, maybe, for a god.

...Or a daemon.

As blood streamed out of Sunny's nose, eyes, and mouth, and a silent scream died on his lips, he instinctively did the only thing that could save him from being obliterated by the sight of the Strings of Fate — he dissipated into the shadows.

This was, perhaps, the reason why his eyes did not turn into smoldering embers and his head did not just explode right there on the spot. Shadows had no eyes and no skulls, after all.

However...

Falling into the embrace of darkness, Sunny realized with cold horror that Weaver's Mask, somehow, was still resting on his face. When he turned into a shadow, it had turned into one, too. His vision shifted from that of a human to the colorless sight of a shadow, but he could still see the eternity of Strings of Fate.

There were especially many of them near him. The infinite threads were tightly wrapped around his body, as well as around his soul, encompassing and piercing it... it looked almost as if he was strung on them like a small marionette.

And among those threads, two shone much brighter than the rest.

One was made out of pure white flame and stretched far away into the distance, leading north, toward the Hollow Mountains.

The other was made out of beautiful golden light, and led... down.

Down and away from both the Shipwreck Island and the Twisted Rock, diving into the Tear and disappearing into the boundless darkness of the Sky Below.

...Although it seemed as though eons had passed, in reality, it was no more than a fraction of a second.

Sunny's head did not explode because he had turned into a shadow, but his mind was still on the verge of utter, irrevocable destruction. A fraction more, and it was going to be wiped out from existence by the divine knowledge of Fate.

'But what... what can I do... the mask is a shadow now...'

His thoughts were scattered and weak. And yet, he fought through the shock and managed to remember an important detail.

He could dismiss the Memory.

But that... would be too slow. Even if it took only a second, there would be nothing left of him by the end of it.

A wave of desperation rose from the depths of his heart.

And then, the shadow essence that Weaver's Mask had absorbed finally ran out.

Instantly, the enchantment deactivated, and the ruthless worlds of endless threads disappeared with it. Sunny could only see what all humans... and shadows... were meant to be able to see.

A piece of dark stone soaring into the sky as the merciless grinder of the Crushing was slowly breaking it apart.

Sunny sensed hazily that there was something urgent about the situation, but he was... was not entirely there.

Although the terrible visage of the Strings of Fate was gone, his mind was scattered and empty. He couldn't really lose conscience while in the form of a shadow, but not being able to think or even recognize the existence of his self was very close to it.

Soon, however, he started to slowly gather the pieces of his wounded, shattered mind back together. He was in dire danger, after all...

The entire Twisted Rock was shaking and rumbling as it rose higher and higher into the Sky Above. Wide cracks appeared on its surface, growing larger with each second. The blackened bones had already been turned into dust, and now, the only thing standing above the stone was the ramshackle, lop-sided, dead treasure chest.

The corpse of the Mordant Mimic, strangely, seemed to be much more sturdy than the ascending island itself. It was still in one piece, at least, and almost whole.

'...I need to come up with a plan.'

As this thought formed in Sunny's mind, he suddenly came to his senses... and realized several things.

One of them was what he had to do.

The other was that the pitiful drops of shadow essence left in his soul cores were about to evaporate, which meant that he would not be able to remain in the form of a shadow for much longer.

The third one was that he still had not retrieved the golden coins from inside the chest.

...Now, whether he lived or died depended on one thing — whether he would be forced out of the shadows and turned into a bloody puddle first, or whether the Twisted Rock would fall apart first.

Which would it be?

'Well... I might as well try, right?'

Flowing through the shadow cast by the treasure chest, he dismissed the Broken Oath. A tiny amount of shadow essence, from which the Memories were created, returned to his soul. Hiding on the surface of the dead Mimic, Sunny dismissed the Blood Blossom and the Puppeteer's Shroud, too.

Finally, he dismissed Weaver's Mask, which brought him much more essence than the previous three Memories combined... even if, in the grand scheme of things, that amount was still rather insignificant.

Still, if it could gift him even one second more, it was worth it.

Circulating his essence through the coils of the Soul Serpent to slow down its expenditure and enhance the speed of its regeneration, Sunny hid on the treasure chest and waited for his fate to be decided.

After something that felt like an eternity, when the Twisted Rock had soared so high above the Chained Isles that the Crushing started turning smaller pieces of stone into fine dust, the island finally shuddered... and cracked open.

One of the rifts that opened in the blackened stone was directly beneath Sunny and the dead Mimic. The whole section of the isle suddenly broke off, separating from it in a rain of rock shards. Sunny caught a glimpse of petrified bones encased in the solidified stone... and then the chest he was hiding on floated up.

For a few seconds, all of it — the remaining core of the island, the sea of stone debris, and the dead Mimic — continued to rise higher and higher. Larger pieces of rock were crushed into smaller ones, and then turned into dust. A deafening thunder filled the air.

But then, as if an invisible switch had been turned, the mysterious force that had kept the Twisted Rock floating between two skies for thousands of years was no more.

Suddenly, everything that was too heavy to be carried away by wind slowed in its ascent, froze in the air for a few moments, and fell down.

The cracked treasure chest tumbled down, too, falling toward the Sky Below. Sunny, who was still just a shadow adhered on its side, saw the world spin around.

The last drops of his shadow essence were about to disappear.

...But that was fine. They would last him long enough to reach the altitude where the Crushing wasn't immediately lethal anymore.

When it finally happened, Sunny suddenly appeared on the surface of the chest and held onto it for dear life. The pressure of the Crushing first threw him against the wood hard enough to break a few ribs, then tried to rip him away.

But Sunny would not let go.

His damned coins were in that damned chest!

Together, he and the dead Mimic fell lower and lower, until, finally, the Crushing weakened enough to allow Sunny to move.

Summoning the Dark Wing, he commanded it to turn into a blur and changed the direction of their fall.

However, he was not trying to move toward the distant silhouette of the Shipwreck Island out of desperation.

Instead, he was guiding the chest in the opposite direction, aiming it into the vast empty expanse of the Tear.

Chapter 431: Fall From Grace

As Sunny and the treasure chest plunged through the skies into the boundless black abyss, pieces of the shattered island pursued them. The Crushing was slowly growing weaker, but it was still strong enough to kill most Awakened.

If not for the power of his shadows, Sunny would have been long dead. And even with it, he was much closer to becoming a corpse than he would have wished to be. His whole body was bruised, bloodied, and in pain.

...Which he could see very clearly, because, in addition to being terribly banged up, Sunny was also currently completely naked.

'What a... glorious sight. Damn it!'

He had dismissed the Puppeteer's Shroud to absorb the shadow essence spent on its summoning, and had none of it left to manifest the armor again. The last drops had been spent to summon the Dark Wing.

As the result, Sunny found himself falling into the Sky Below atop a lopsided treasure chest while wearing nothing but his pack and the strip of leather holding his broken arm in place. His only hope right now was that neither Master Roan nor Saint Tyris would suddenly appear to save the day and see him in this state.

He would rather plunge into the Tear than live through that embarrassment.

Well... not really.

'I take it back. Both of them can descend from the clouds and carry me away in their arms. I won't mind! No, really!'

But no one came to his rescue. Dodging the heavy slabs of shattered stone and desperately trying to glide through the field of debris, Sunny slowly pushed the chest toward the empty expanse of the Tear and prayed that nothing would damage his fragile cloak.

It was having enough trouble obeying his commands already.

The Dark Wing wasn't really designed to carry heavy weights. It could barely support just Sunny himself... and that was in normal conditions. Now that Sunny was refusing to let go of the dead Mimic, and with both of them being affected by the Crushing, the enchanted cloak was on the verge of breaking apart. Instead of gliding smoothly away from the falling rocks, Sunny and the treasure chest were more or less just falling between them at a slight angle.

Needless to say, dodging the debris of the destroyed island in these circumstances was not easy. But, somehow, Sunny managed to protect both himself and the Dark Wing for long enough to escape the danger zone in one piece.

By then, the Crushing had become almost bearable.

Sitting on the lid of the treasure chest and feeling the terrible pressure grow weaker and weaker with each second, Sunny grimaced from pain, then let out a relieved sigh. The cool breeze was softly touching his burning face, as well as his... well, everything. All things considered, the fall was not unpleasant.

But then, a sudden thought appeared in his mind.

'...What are you feeling relieved about, idiot?'

Oh... right.

Looking down, Sunny saw nothing but the swiftly approaching, boundless dark expanse of the Sky Below.

The endless abyss that stretched downward forever, and from which there was no escape. Not unless one knew how to fly.

That was where he was headed. <the source of this content is freewebn(o)vel.c0m.>

Except for the golden String of Fate Sunny had seen disappearing into the depth of the Tear, he had no reason whatsoever to believe that he would survive the fall into the Sky Below, let alone ever be able to return to the Sanctuary and the real world. Most likely, he was going to go mad and either be devoured by some terrifying abyssal titan or die of hunger.

His life, almost literally, was hanging by a thread.

...But right now, he didn't care. All he cared about was the physical relief of not being pressed down upon by the Crushing. He was still wounded all over and in pain, but experiencing just the normal amount of it was almost euphoric.

'It's the small things that matter...'

Like not being constantly crushed by an invisible, murderous magical force. Or resting comfortably on a wide lid of a treasure chest instead of having your limbs being crushed in its jaws.

...Simple stuff like that.

Now that the Crushing was almost gone, Sunny used the Dark Wing to push the dead Mimic deeper into the Tear, as well as keep it level in the air. The treasure chest was wide and long, and its lid was flat. In a sense, it was almost like a firm, narrow cot.

There were worse ways to fall into an endless abyss, really.

Sunny stared at the wide sweep of the Tear, trying to burn the memory of the golden string of light into his mind.

The Tear was situated in the center of the Chained Isles, and was both vast and absolutely empty. Some people believed that the Ivory Tower had once stood in its middle, and was the first island to break free of its chains. Over thousands of years, islands that had bordered it were slowly destroyed one after another, causing the Tear to grow.

By now, it was a couple of hundred kilometers across, and from what Sunny could tell, the String of Fate led to somewhere in its very center.

The question was... how deep in there was the thing on the other end of the String? The longest someone had flown down into the Sky Below before turning back was a week. Was the mysterious object hidden in an even deeper part of the abyss?

And what was that object?

Sunny could not even guess. The only thing he knew was that his intuition had pushed him toward the Twisted Rock because of it.

If so... it should have been something that would allow him to survive.

Right?

Of course, his fate might have been to just die there. Fate didn't really discriminate against any type of occurrence, including fatal ones. Regardless, Sunny was going to find out.

...It's not like he had a choice now.

Feeling the air get colder, he shivered and watched the sky around him grow darker and darker.

Soon, there was no light left in it at all.

Sunny had fallen into the Sky Below.

Chapter 432: First Day of Nothing

'This is... sort of grim.'

Sunny was falling through a boundless, empty void of cold darkness. Far below, false stars were shimmering with pale white light. Their radiance, however, did very little to illuminate the Sky Below. Everywhere around him, there was just... nothing.

Sunny was still resting atop the treasure chest, holding onto it with his one healthy hand. He had no reference point to measure how far he had traveled, but suspected that the distance was swiftly leaving the realm of mundane sense and logic.

He was not very educated, however, even he knew that a falling object would forever accelerate at a steady pace... theoretically. That meant that every second Sunny was falling, his speed was increasing exponentially. By now, it had to be simply insane.

But he did not really feel that speed. All he felt were wisps of cold wind caressing his skin from time to time. If there was one good thing about the situation, it was that he had accumulated a bit of shadow essence and was able to summon the Puppeteer's Shroud again. So he wasn't naked anymore, at least.

If there was one thing he did know, though, it was the approximate speed with which he could glide forward with the help of the Dark Wing. Adding the weight of the dead treasure to the equation, he could more or less calculate the distance he was covering horizontally. With that in mind, he guessed that he would reach the middle of the Tear in around a day... <visit (freeweb)novel.com for a better_user experience.>

Problem was, he had no reliable way to measure time, as well. There were some clues he could try to use, like the rate of shadow essence regeneration or the state of his wounds, but they were not exactly reliable.

In heroic stories, characters often found themselves in similar situations. Every time that happened, the hero somehow managed to measure the passage of time by the state of their facial hair. Sadly, despite being eighteen, Sunny could not grow even the most pitiful of beards. That was a real shame.

'...I guess I'm not hero material.'

With a bitter sigh, he stared at the lid of the treasure chest and tried to assess his physical state.

Things weren't good, but they also weren't very bad. He had sustained minor internal damage due to the Crushing, as well as several rather ugly wounds in the battle against Mimic. The half-healed cuts left on his body by the Mirror Beast had also opened at some point, and were now hurting once again.

The worst injury was, of course, his broken arm.

His mental state was also somewhat in shambles after being ravaged by the visage of the Strings of Fate. Luckily, there seemed to be no long-lasting effects. Even the splitting headache was already growing fainter. Sunny also could not remember the exact details of what he had seen, as if his mind completely erased them from his memory to protect itself.

The only thing that remained was the fragment of the memory that he had preserved on purpose — the image of the thread of golden light leading deep into the Tear.

Sunny stared at the black nothingness, waited for a while, then slowly exhaled.

'Great. Now what?'

There was no answer.

After a while — Sunny had no idea how long — he got tired of waiting for something to happen and decided to act.

'Might as well...'

The first thing he did was summon the Covetous Coffe.

Sunny expected that an identical chest would appear near the dead one, but instead, what he saw was a miniature version of it. A box made of dark wood, with strips of iron reinforcing it, appeared on the lid of the treasure chest.

It was about the size of a jewelry box, but not at all elegant. In fact, the Covetous Coffe looked more mean than graceful... somehow. As Sunny stared at it, the lid of the box raised slightly, revealing rows of sharp iron teeth.

He blinked.

'I guess that's all I can manage with my current Soul Core capacity.'

Shaking his head, Sunny looked at the Coffe and said in an uncertain tone:

"Come here."

Immediately, eight short iron legs appeared from under the box, and it scurried over before plopping down near him.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, glanced at his fingers, then cautiously opened the lid of the box. Luckily, it didn't try to bite them off.

Taking off his pack, Sunny transferred its contents into the box. Although it seemed rather small, the Coffe swallowed all his supplies without any problem.

'...Perfect.'

Sunny closed the box, patted it on the lid, and dismissed it.

Then, he summoned the Moonlight Shard and methodically cut his now empty pack into strips of leather. Using his one healthy hand and his teeth, Sunny tied them into a semblance of a rope, then tied himself to the treasure chest, and finally calmed down.

Now, his coins weren't going anywhere.

Satisfied with his handiwork, Sunny rested for a bit. He was starting to feel tired... and sleepy.

Falling through the endless abyss turned out to be way less exciting than he had thought. In fact, it was extremely boring.

There were still a lot of things he had to do, though...

With a grimace, Sunny cautiously shifted his weight and crawled to the end of the chest. There, he used the Moonlight Shard to widen a crack on the side of the dead Mimic and separate two long planks of wood from it.

Then, he made a roll out of the last strip of leather he had and bit down on it.

'This... is going to suck.'

Without giving himself too much time to think about it, he removed his broken arm from its sling, and then proceeded to swiftly set the bones... just like he had been taught.

A sharp, blinding pain pierced his mind.

When Sunny regained his vision and the ability to think straight, he saw that his arm did not look like jelly anymore. It seemed more or less straight.

'That will have to do...'

Hissing and cursing, he used the two planks of wood and the strip of leather to create a sturdy splint, then carefully placed it back inside the sling. Now, his broken bones had a good chance of growing back together correctly.

Hopefully.

After that, Sunny summoned the Endless Spring and the Covetous Coffers, took some of his remaining food out of it, and had a strangely relaxed meal on top of the dead Mimic's lid.

By the time he was done, the Sky Below... did not change at all.

He was still falling into its depths, slowly moving the treasure chest toward the center of the Tear with the help of the Dark Wing.

...He was also absolutely exhausted.

Sunny somberly stared at the distant false stars.

He stared at them until his eyes started to water and his thoughts became slow and muddy.

Then, he stared at them some more.

After a while, he thought:

'I can't take it anymore.'

By then, his reserves of shadow essence were full by a third. Judging that around twenty-four hours had passed after the destruction of the Twisted Rock, Sunny sighed, then dismissed the Dark Wing and allowed the chest to start falling straight down.

He was going to have to keep falling into the Sky Below for six more days... at least. Probably longer. Sunny shook his head, knowing full well that these estimations had almost nothing to do with reality.

Then, he did something that he had never thought he would ever do...

He cautiously lay down on the long lid of the dead Mimic, tightened the rope connecting them together... and closed his eyes.

Soon, Sunny was dead asleep, plummeting into the darkness of the abyss without a care in the world.

Chapter 433: More of the Same Nothing

Sunny's bed trembled slightly, and he felt the wind blowing across the room. Still mostly asleep, he sighed and tried to pull the blanket higher. However, that damned thing was nowhere to be found.

'Where the hell is it...'

Reluctant to let go of sleep, he blindly searched for the blanket. Instead of finding it, though, Sunny suddenly felt his whole bed careen to the side. Startled, he opened his eyes... and saw nothing but darkness surrounding him.

'What the?! Oh... right.'

He wasn't in his small room in the Sanctuary. He was plummeting into a lightless abyss atop the corpse of a Fallen Devil, instead.

Sunny stared into the darkness for a bit.

Then, he yawned.

'Well. At least I slept well.'

Indeed, he was feeling rather refreshed. Most of his aches had either disappeared or grown milder, and even his wounded mind felt soothed. He felt rested, energized, and much better overall.

The only problem was, he was still falling into the endless void of the Sky Below.

Sunny scratched the back of his head, though about this predicament, then summoned the Endless Spring and drank some water. Then, he concentrated and tried to assess the situation.

...The situation was absolutely the same.

He was surrounded by nothing, nothing had changed while he slept, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Sunny sighed and stared at the treasure chest beneath him. After a while, he thought:

'If you think about it, this is just next-level pettiness. Not only did I kill this poor bastard, I even went so far as to take a nap on top of its dead body. Talk about insulting...'

Somewhere down, down below, false stars shimmered with white light.

Judging by how much of his shadow essence had regenerated, Sunny judged that he slept for about twelve hours. A bit longer than usual, but he was really exhausted after everything that had transpired.

These calculations of his, of course, were very rough. But if he assumed them to be correct, that would mean that he had left the Sanctuary six days ago.

He had no idea how long it was going to take to reach the thing on the end of the golden String of Fate, but had to assume that it would take at least a week... much longer than that, most likely.

Back in the real world, his body was safely hidden in the luxurious sleeping pod in the basement of his house. The pod would keep it alive for months, so Sunny was not too worried about his physical well-being... yet.

Would anyone miss him?

...Probably not. Kai and Effie were used to his long ventures into the Dream Realm, and even if none of them had been as long as this one was going to be, they would just assume that he was too lazy to answer their messages and go about their business. They were famous heroes now, after all, with packed schedules and plenty of problems of their own.

Teacher Julius didn't expect any reports from him, too. The lookouts in the Sanctuary were not in the habit of keeping a detailed record of who went in

and out of the Citadel. The most anyone was going to think about him would be when Cassie arrived from the Night Temple, and he wasn't there to help Saint Tyrus receive her.

But she would just think that he was avoiding her, as he had done before.

Sitting on the lid of the dead treasure chest in boundless darkness, Sunny realized that no one was really going to care that he was gone. So many things had changed, but even more remained just the same.

Throwing a long look at the beautiful glass bottle in his hand, Sunny remained motionless for a while, then dismissed it and knocked on the lid of the dead Mimic.

'Whatever. I have my coins, at least!'

Some time later, he was performing a strange aerial dance. Holding onto the rope connecting him to the dead Mimic with his one functioning hand, Sunny summoned the Dark Wing, then cautiously climbed onto the side of the big chest and tried to balance it so that the heavy thing didn't flip.

Because of the fact that both of them were plummeting down with incredible speed, his body felt pleasantly light. Sunny thought about it for a while, then frowned.

How did that even make any sense? Yesterday, he had thought that the speed of his fall was going to increase exponentially, which meant that at some point his body was bound to be simply torn apart... probably.

But now, he realized that his assumption was wrong. Since he could breathe in the Sky Below and felt the wind — or rather, the air moving past him as he fell through it — it meant that the speed of his fall had a limit dictated by the air resistance.

He did not, however, feel that resistance too much. By all accounts, he should have been hearing the roaring of the wind and feeling it assault his

body, instead of falling through the emptiness in something that resembled comfort.

Common sense didn't seem to be working the Sky Below.

'Better not think about it too much.'

What was the point of trying to understand the laws of a place that simply denied all logic? He had far more practical things to do.

Trusting the leather rope to hold his weight, Sunny let go of it and summoned the Moonlight Shard. Then, perched precariously on the side of the treasure chest, he inserted the narrow blade of the ghostly stiletto between its lip and the lid, and tried to pry it open.

The task turned out to be far more difficult than Sunny had anticipated. Not only did he have to do everything with only one hand, he also had to balance the chest to prevent it from spinning in the empty void... as well as keep an eye on the rope, hoping nervously that it would not break.

After some time and plenty of exasperated curses, however, he finally managed to pry the jaws of the dead devil open.

Inside its maw, a pile of golden coins was waiting for him to claim them.

A dark smile appeared on Sunny's face.

Then, he let out a shaky, slightly unhinged laugh.

"Ah! It feels nice to be rich..."

Chapter 434: A Lot of Nothing

Summoning the Covetous Coffers, he commanded the toothy box to climb inside the... bigger, toothier box and open its lid. Then, he started whistling a lighthearted melody while throwing the heavy coins inside.

'One, two, three, four... ah, what a day to be alive... five, six...'

One after another, the miraculous golden discs disappeared into the Coffers. After a while, Sunny shifted his weight slightly, got more comfortable, and continued gathering his spoils.

In the end, he had recovered almost fourteen hundred coins from inside the dead devil. Just as Sunny had expected, the entire top layer of the treasure pile had turned out to be real.

That was an incredible, astonishing boon! Suddenly, everything that had happened seemed worth it...

Almost.

Glancing at the lightless void around him, Sunny sighed.

'Who knows if I will even be able to return to the Sanctuary? Without the altar, these coins are just dead weight.'

Somewhat disheartened, he lingered for a few moments, then turned his gaze back to the opened treasure chest.

The top layer of the treasure pile that he had successfully plundered was indeed real, but beneath it...

Sunny struggled to keep the contents of his stomach inside. Beneath the treasure, the limbs and organs of the Mimic were tightly packed together, taking up most of the chest's volume. The whole thing was soaked in black blood and producing a sickening stench, not to mention looking like a butcher's nightmare.

'Disgusting... so disgusting...'

Thinking about how repulsive the sight in front of him was, Sunny used the Moonlight Shard to cut through the terrible sludge and fished out four large soul shards with a wide smile on his face. After cleaning them up a little, he placed the alluring crystals inside the Covetous Coffers and dismissed the Memory with a feeling of great satisfaction.

After that, Sunny stared inside the treasure chest with a dubious expression on his face.

The thing was... he only had around three days worth of provisions left, stored neatly inside the Covetous Coffers. If he rationed his food, it would probably last him for about a week. After that...

Sunny scratched the back of his head, then shuddered and closed the lid of the chest with a loud thud.

'...I'll think about it when the time comes. But, hopefully, it never does!'

With that, he climbed back onto the dead devil and rested for a while, looking into the darkness.

As time slowly passed, Sunny grew more and more solemn. Finally, he came to a frightening realization.

...He had nothing else left to do.

"This is going to be a problem."

An eternity later — or just a few hours, who knew — Sunny was sitting on top of the treasure chest and dying from boredom.

He was still falling through the boundless dark abyss. Of course, what else would he be doing? There was nothing else to do!

The Cruel Sight was in his hand, the silver blade shining with a bright radiance. He was using its [Light Eater] enchantment to summon the sunlight the somber spear had absorbed and project it into the darkness of the Sky Below. Thanks to that light, the shapes of his two shadows could be clearly seen, one resting on the surface of the chest to his left, the other to his right.

Sunny shook his head, then said:

"I am dying of boredom here. I have never been this bored. How are we going to survive weeks of this crap? What do you guys think?"

The happy shadow to his right hesitated, then raised a fist encouragingly. Its sentiment was quite clear:

"You got this!"

The gloomy shadow to his left stared at him grimly, then simply shook its head. Its meaning was clear, too...

"Just give up already..."

Sunny blinked a couple of times, then smiled.

"Well, I think it's going to be fine. I'll just... think about it as a vacation. Yeah. When was the last time I could just relax and do nothing? That's right... never! If you think about it, guys, this is a godsend opportunity. An opportunity to rest and laze about as much as I want."

He remained silent for a while, then added:

"I literally have no choice but to do nothing. Lucky me, right?"

The gloomy shadow glanced at him, then covered its face with a palm.

Even the happy shadow hesitated for a bit before giving him a timid shrug.

Sunny frowned.

"What do you mean, go crazy? I am not going to go crazy! I'm so done with being crazy. Been there, done that, as they say. There is zero possibility that I will go crazy."

The shadows didn't answer, making him huff angrily.

"Whatever! Why am I even speaking to you two? It's not like you even have enough decency to pull your weight in the conversation!"

He scowled and dismissed the Cruel Sight, letting the darkness shroud everything once again. The shadows became invisible.

After a while, Sunny said scornfully:

"And it's not like I don't have better alternatives to talk to, anyway."

...Where had he put the Ordinary Rock?

By the time three days had passed — at least Sunny suspected that it had been three days, since that was how long his shadow essence usually took to fully recover without the aid of the Soul Serpent — he was, indeed, on the verge of losing his mind.

It wasn't even the boredom that was the worst, it was the absolute lack of any external stimuli.

Nothing ever changed in the Sky Below. Nothing ever happened. Nothing ever appeared, or disappeared, or was there at all. There was nothing but empty darkness, the distant shimmering stars, and him.

And falling.

At the start of it all, Sunny had been worried that he would encounter evil, colossal, inconceivably horrifying creatures in the abyss. That was what one would expect from an abyss, right? But there was none.

By now, he almost hoped to encounter a stray titan or two.

He had heard that people were prone to going insane in isolation, but never expected to be in such a situation himself.

Sunny had spent the first day thinking about this and that, remembering his experiences and trying to learn something from them.

He wondered about the Mirror Beast and the Cruel Sight. Why was the silver spear even called that? Then, he understood.

It was called the Cruel Sight because its polished blade showed a person their own reflection.

He wondered about the shipwreck, the coins, the Mimic, and the person called Noctis. How were all of these things connected?

After a while, he guessed that Noctis had been the captain of the ancient ship, the master of the Mimic, and the person whose face was depicted on the miraculous coins. Noctis was also probably the one who had created the coins, in the first place.

That's why they could only be used in his Sanctuary.

He wondered about what Kai, Effie, and Cassie were doing.

He wondered about Nephis.

On the second day, he summoned the runes and saw that she had become a devil. Sunny stared at the counter that showed [2/4000] with a deadpan expression, then sighed and dove into the Soul Sea.

There, he had studied all of his Memories and the shadows of all the creatures he had killed.

That only took him a couple of hours.

...Or an eternity.

On the third day, Sunny just lay on the lid of the dead mimic and stared into the void. His mind was starting to behave in strange ways. Although there

was nothing around him, Sunny could sometimes see strange shapes and silhouettes in the darkness, as well as hear distant noises.

He wanted to think that they were real, but knew that it was just the result of prolonged sensory starvation. Human minds were weird that way... they couldn't really withstand a lot of nothing.

Suddenly, the story of a man who had to turn back after seven days of descending into the Sky Below out of fear of going insane made much more sense to him.

To make himself perceive at least something, Sunny summoned the Silver Bell and rang it in the darkness, listening to the melodious ringing as it disappeared into the abyss.

And now, he was sitting on the treasure chest, looking at the distant stars, and speaking with the Ordinary Rock.

"So, how has your day been, Rock?"

The Memory answered in his own voice:

"Same old nothing. Yours?"

Sunny remained silent for a while, then said:

"I am enjoying my vacation."

The Ordinary Rock laughed.

"Sounds wonderful! How is your vacation going?"

He sighed.

"Splendidly. I've yet to hit the rock bottom."

For a while, there was nothing but silence. Then, a new question came:

"...Why is it so dark?"

Sunny smiled weekly.

"Why wouldn't it be dark? This is the Sky Below, after all!"

But then, he froze.

'...What?'

The voice that asked the question... had not come from the Ordinary Rock.

That voice was not his own.

Chapter 435: Listening to Nothing

Sunny shuddered.

The voice he heard... was not his own. It sounded pleasant and calm, and seemed to have come from the darkness of the Sky Below itself.

'...Have I finally lost it?'

His first thought was that he had gone crazy again and was now hearing things.

His second thought was much less comforting...

'Damnation!'

Had he summoned some unholy titan from the depths of the Sky Below, after all?!

Sunny outstretched one hand, ready to manifest the Cruel Sight, but then hesitated.

If the owner of the voice was not a figment of his imagination, but some harrowing being of the void, was it really wise to agitate it? Would the silver blade even do anything against it?

'Calm down. Calm down. Maybe you just imagined the whole thing...'

As if to answer his thoughts, the void laughed softly.

"Ah, my apologies. I seem to have startled you."

Sunny gulped.

The pleasant voice seemed to belong to a young man, but no matter how hard he looked into the darkness, he couldn't see anyone... or anything... nearby.

He was reminded of his first meeting with Kai, only this time... this time, things were much more frightening.

"N—no worries. I just... didn't expect to hear another human's voice here. You, uh... you are a human... right?"

The void was silent for a while, then answered in a neutral tone:

"A human? I used to be a human once, I guess."

Sunny realized that he couldn't even pinpoint the direction from which the voice was coming. It was just... there, somehow. Everywhere. Around him...

He tensed, then asked cautiously:

"Used to? Then what are you now?"

The voice disappeared for a few moments, then sighed. Finally, it answered:

"...Lost."

Sunny blinked.

'What the hell does he mean?'

"Lost? As in lost in the Sky Below?"

The darkness let out a sad laugh.

"...No. Not in the Sky Below."

As Sunny felt cold shivers run down his spine, it hesitantly added:

"I am sorry. I haven't spoken to anyone in a long, long time. Instead of lost, It would be more proper to say that I am one of the Lost. My body in the waking world was destroyed, but my soul continues to exist here, in the Dream Realm. I hope that explanation is more clear."

One of the Lost...

Sunny knew of these people, although he had never met one in person. Just like there were Hollow — people whose souls were destroyed, leaving an empty body behind — there were also the Lost. People whose bodies had somehow died in the real world, leaving their souls stranded in the Dream Realm. There wasn't a lot of them, since most of the time the soul perished shortly after the body had, but there were some.

Knowing that the owner of the voice was one of these lost souls made Sunny relax a little... not that he had any reason to believe that the stranger was telling him the truth. He could have been a Nightmare Creature, still.

Or something worse...

But even if he was Lost, that didn't explain how they were able to converse. The Lost, from what Sunny knew, were just like any other Awakened in the Dream Realm. It was just that they couldn't return to the real world.

What they certainly were not were disembodied voices coming from the void.

He shifted his weight slightly, ready to... do something to protect himself, if need be, and asked:

"Sorry to hear that. But how is it that I am able to hear your voice, but can't see you?"

The voice lingered for some time, that answered with a bit of amusement:

"That is a good question."

Sunny waited patiently for him to expand on that answer, but that seemed to be it. A bit irritated, he said:

"Well? Aren't you going to explain?"

Instead, the voice suddenly asked:

"Why are you descending into the Sky Below? This is a very dangerous place."

Sunny blinked a couple of times, then coughed.

"Ah, that... well, you see... I am not so much descending into the Sky Below as I am falling into it. I got stuck on an island because of the Crushing, and sadly, that island broke off its chain. So, I had to jump off. And here I am."

Then, he frowned.

"Wait... dangerous place? Why is it dangerous? I haven't seen anything dangerous anywhere in this dreadful pit!"

The voice lingered for a while, then sighed with regret.

"You'll see. When you reach the stars... then you will see."

Then, it disappeared.

Sunny stared into the darkness, a bit disturbed. A deep frown appeared on his face.

"What do you mean? What will happen when I reach the stars?"

But there was no answer.

No matter how long Sunny waited, the voice did not speak to him again. The void was silent and empty, just as it had been before.

In the end, he just massaged his temples and cursed.

"What the hell was that?!"

Did he imagine the whole thing? Had his mind finally cracked?

Sunny stared at the Ordinary Rock, as though expecting it to actually talk and collaborate his story. Sadly, the Memory could only repeat the sounds it

had recently heard...

'Wait... the sounds it had heard!'

Sunny hurriedly commanded the Rock to repeat everything it had recorded in the past few minutes. Then, feeling cold sweat appear on his forehead, he listened to his own voice speaking to nothing. His words were repeated, but where the words of the strange voice should have been, there was nothing but silence.

Dismissing the Ordinary Rock, Sunny clutched his hair and groaned.

"Crazy... I've gone completely crazy... curse it all, it has been just four days, and am already turning back into a lunatic!"

Not even a full week passed by, and he was already going insane.

"This is the worst vacation ever!"

After a while, he frowned.

Despite being mostly sure that the whole thing was just a symptom of his sanity slowly breaking apart, Sunny cautiously crawled to the edge of the chest and looked down, at the distant shimmering stars.

..Was he imagining things, or did they seem to be a little closer?

Chapter 436: Nothing to worry About

After the conversation with the disembodied voice of the void — whether it was real or not — Sunny felt different. Not exactly better, but at least not as lost and unmoored as before.

'That would be really ironic if the voice was just a figment of my imagination, wouldn't it?'

The empty void around him didn't seem as empty anymore. Even if it was now full of potential danger, the danger was better than nothing.

...Anything was better than nothing. After four days spent in the endless silence of the dark abyss, Sunny realized just how terrible nothingness was. The human mind was simply not built to withstand it.

In any case, he wasted some time staring at the distant stars, and then got to thinking.

Now that his cores were once again full of essence, he had no tool left to measure time. After considering his options for a while, he summoned the Cruel Sight and activated the [Dark Mirror] enchantment.

Even though he had no enemies to fight in the Sky Below, simply keeping the enchantment active was going to drain his shadow essence. Sunny felt that he could keep it going for about two hours straight.

After his reserve of Essene became approximately half-empty, he dismissed the Cruel Sight and sat cross-legged in the center of the dead devil's lid.

Plummeting through the lightless void, Sunny inhaled deeply and closed his eyes. Then, he concentrated on the flow of essence through his body, feeling it permeate every fiber of his being.

Directing it into the coils of the Soul Serpent, he felt its flow accelerate and widen.

By using the Shadow, he was going to replenish all of the spent essence in about a day. That was going to be his clock from now on.

Sunny exhaled, directed the shadow essence into his left hand, and concentrated it in his thumb, then in his index finger...

Thanks to the Soul Serpent, his control of the essence was better than that of most Awakened. However, it was still rather crude. Sunny innately knew how to enhance his physical attributes by expending it, but wasn't really efficient with how he did it. To him, it was a matter of instinct — he just thought about making his hand stronger, and the essence flowed like a torrent to achieve the desired effect.

That was how all young Awakened used it.

True masters, however, were much more intricate in their control of essence. They could isolate every muscle, every nerve, every bone in their body and only enhance those parts of it that they needed to perform an action. Their expenditure of essence was more akin to a trickle than a torrent, but achieved the same result.

That's why between two Awakened with similar soul core capacity, one could be able to fight at his peak physical prowess for much longer.

...Now that Sunny had nothing else to do, he decided to really work on this aspect of mastery over his own body and soul. He had practiced essence control before, of course, but between the constant need to hunt down Nightmare Creatures and the fact that Soul Serpent served as an effective replacement for months of training, not as much as he could and should have.

Directing the flow of essence into his right hand, Sunny sighed and thought:

'Vacation is over.'

Two more days passed... or rather, two cycles of spending shadow essence with the help of the Cruel Sight and then waiting for it to regenerate, which Sunny had decided to count as days.

He spent that time meditating as he controlled the flow of the essence through his body, sleeping, and feeling hungry.

Now that Sunny was rationing his food, the feeling of hunger that he had forgotten ever since becoming infected by the Nightmare Spell returned. Even then, his supplies were on the verge of running out.

He only had enough for two meager meals left. After that, Sunny was either going to have to starve, or consider opening the treasure chest again and gnawing on the dead devil's raw meat.

Both possibilities seemed rather bleak.

What he was more concerned about, however, were the shimmering fake stars of the Sky Below.

Now, he was more or less sure that they were slowly growing larger. If not for the conversation with the voice of the void, he would have never noticed the subtle change. But after being alerted to their importance and spending a lot of time observing the stars, he had become convinced that the voice — whether it was one of the Lost, a Nightmare Creature pretending to be human, or simply a manifestation of his damaged psyche — had been right.

He was slowly drawing closer to the stars burning in the deepest reaches of the abyss.

If only the voice had told him why, exactly, the stars were dangerous...

Luckily, on the seventh day of his plummeting through the Sky Below, the voice returned.

Sunny was grimly eating his second to last piece of food and staring into the darkness, feeling his mind teetering on the verge of madness, when the voice resounded from the void again:

"...What a curious creature you are."

'Oh, thank god!'

Sunny choked on a piece of dried meat, took a sip of water from the Endless Spring to chase it down, and glanced at the empty expanse of the Sky Below with a dark expression.

"Where the hell have you been?!"

The voice remained silent for a bit, then answered apologetically:

"Talking like this is draining for me. I was recovering."

Sunny frowned, trying to glean some information about the nature of the owner of the pleasant voice from this statement, but then gave up. He had too few clues to guess.

"Well... if you are about to disappear for a few days again, at least tell me what's the deal with these stars first. Why are they so dangerous?"

The void hesitated:

"You don't know?"

Sunny blinked.

"Of course, I don't know! Why would I ask if I knew?"

When the void answered in a few moments, it sounded slightly surprised:

"Well. Those lights are not really stars. They are actually remnant conflagrations of the divine flame."

Sunny thought about what he just heard, then tilted his head to the side.

"Divine... flame? What? Why would divine flame burn in the depths of the Sky Below?"

The voice chuckled. Then, it said with a bit of amusement:

"How do you think the Sky Below came to be? A long time ago, this was a beautiful and prosperous land, you know."

The amusement drained from its voice, replaced with something much darker.

"But then, its prideful ruler provoked the wrath of the Lord of Light. The Lord... ah, you probably only know him as Sun God... brought down his heavenly flame upon the lands, shattering the earth and burying an unquenchable fire beneath it."

The void grew silent, and then sighed.

"Over the ages, that fire devoured everything — the earth, the land, even reality itself. All that is left is this empty abyss, and the remnant fragments of the divine flame still burning deep below. So, I am sorry to say this... but unless you know a way to survive the searing heat of the all-destroying heavenly fire, you will probably burn to death in a few weeks."

Chapter 437: Nothing, Nothing, Nothing

Sunny sat silently for a few moments, thinking.

'Sun God...'

So, the ruler of this land had angered the gods, and one of them struck down her kingdom. He could just imagine it — a vast pillar of incandescent white flame falling from the skies, piercing the ground and causing the whole region to fracture, its fragments falling into the searing inferno of the divine flame one after another.

Well... not all of them had fallen.

He glanced up, wondering if the Chained Isles were created to save the citizens of the destroyed kingdom from annihilation. If so... that prideful ruler must have been not so simple herself.

Who would be powerful enough to dare resist the wrath of the gods?

And what had that being done to provoke it?

But more importantly...

How the hell did the voice of the void knew so much about it?

A subtly suspicious expression appeared on his face.

"...Really? This is very interesting. And how exactly do you know all this?"

Sunny hesitated, and then cautiously added:

"Did you, perhaps, have something to do with that prideful ruler?"

The voice was silent for a moment, and then suddenly exploded with sincere laughter.

"Oh my! I wish! Wouldn't that be grand... but no, I am just an Awakened who had studied the Chained Isles, probably the same way that you have studied them in your travels. The ruins here are all but destroyed by the endless cycle of the Crushing, but if one knows where to look, there are still some answers left to find."

Sunny smiled.

"True. But I am actually a research assistant for the Wilderness Survival faculty of the Academy, and yet I have never seen any of the information you possess in the database. With the level of access that I have, that is very strange, isn't it?"

The voice chuckled.

"How am I supposed to report my findings to the Academy? I can't even leave the Dream Realm."

Sunny blinked.

That... actually made a lot of sense. Sort of. Lost or not, an Awakened still had to survive somehow in the Dream Realm, so they were bound to live in one of the Citadels. Probably. So, it wasn't like they had no contact at all with the real world, even if it was only through the other inhabitants of their Citadel.

Unless the owner of the voice was not a usual Lost. Or was lying to Sunny...

Or was just a figment of his imagination.

He frowned.

"...By the way, where are you, exactly? I haven't heard a voice like yours anywhere in the Sanctuary. And I have spoken to most of the Awakened there at least once."

The voice lingered for a while, then answered:

"I am not in the Sanctuary."

What was that supposed to mean? There was another Citadel on the Chained Isles, the Night Temple. But only those serving Valor were allowed to anchor there. Well... excluding Cassie and her cohort.

Did the owner of the voice have something to do with the great clan Valor? Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Are you from the Night Temple, then?"

...But there was no response.

It seemed that the mysterious young man Sunny had been speaking with — if he was even real — had once again reached his limit, thus ending their conversation.

Sunny sighed.

"I swear to gods, this is even more annoying than when Effie leaves me on read!"

Who knew that a voice of the void could be more irritating than someone who had been almost literally raised by wild wolves?

"No manners! No decorum..."

Soon, Sunny regretted not asking the voice necessary questions. He would have to be more strategic with his words in the future...

"Survive heavenly fire... survive heavenly fire..."

Sunny glanced at the stars and felt that they had drawn even closer.

How was he supposed to withstand the searing heat of the divine flame?

Could that flame burn shadows?

He didn't really have an answer, but felt that it would be at least damaging to him, even in his shadow form.

And then, there was a more looming problem. The voice said that it would take Sunny a few weeks to reach the layer of the abyss containing the false stars, which meant that he was going to be... very, very hungry by the time he did.

Humans could survive a surprising amount of time without any food, but it would take a heavy toll on his body. Sunny had no idea what he was going to find on the other end of the golden String of Fate, but doubted that it would be a warm welcome.

He had to be ready to confront danger, and becoming starved and weak was not really an option.

Sunny lingered for a while, then stared down, at the lid of the treasure chest.

Was he really going to have to eat... that?

Even his shadows seemed disgusted by the idea.

But hey... food was food.

'Right?'

With a sigh, Sunny summoned the Covetous Coffin, took out his last meal out, and looked at it with regret.

"Tonight... we feast!"

'...Tomorrow, we mourn. And barf. Probably.'

A few days later, the stars were visibly brighter than they had been before. The sight of the black void littered with shimmering lights would have been beautiful if not for the terrible danger they represented.

Sunny was sitting in the center of the plummeting treasure chest with an extremely miserable expression on his face. It was deathly pale, and his chin was covered with drying black blood.

Raising a piece of raw devil meat to his mouth, he tore a piece of it with his teeth, and forced himself to chew.

'Disgusting... this is so disgusting... who knew I would miss the taste of synthpaste one day? Maybe I should just starve, after all!'

As soon as he thought that, the void suddenly spoke again:

"Oh, gods! You are actually eating that!"

Sunny stared into the darkness with hatred, swallowed the piece of mimic meat, and said evenly:

"Sure. Want a bite?"

The voice hesitated for several seconds, then asked:

"You're eating it raw?"

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"Of course I am eating it raw, you fool! How else am I supposed to eat it? I don't exactly have a kitchen here!"

Then, with a furious determination, he tore another piece of meat and chewed on it. As it turned out, his face had not reached its maximum paleness before. Now, it seemed not only white, but also a little green.

The void sighed. Then, it asked curiously:

"Are you not afraid of poisoning yourself?"

Sunny snarled.

"...I have a strong stomach."

He had, indeed, considered the possibility of catching a severe case of food poisoning from eating the corrupted meat of the vile devil. As an Awakened, however, his digestive system was much stronger than that of mundane humans. And on top of that, there was Blood Weave. So, he judged that his chances of dying from eating the mimic were rather low.

...Now matter how poetic it would have been. Choking to death on the flesh of a devil you killed would be, too...

'How funny.'

Sunny swallowed the disgusting meat and took a sip from the Endless Spring.

A few moments later, the voice asked:

"Have you thought of a way to survive the divine flames?"

He stared at his broken arm, then shrugged.

"I considered a few."

The voice seemed to be pleased to hear that.

"Good. I have thought about it, as well..."

Chapter 438: Prince of Nothing

Sunny stared into the void suspiciously.

"Yeah? And how come you are so concerned about my well-being?"

The voice remained silent for a bit, then answered wistfully:

"I haven't really spoken to anyone in a long, long time. It would be a shame to finally find someone to talk to, only for them to die soon. Don't you think?"

"That guy is definitely not just a simple Lost... what is his deal, really? Is he actually a human or only pretends to be one?"

Sunny thought for a bit, then said:

"I guess. And since we're on the topic... how is it exactly that we are able to talk?"

He expected the voice to change the subject or ignore the question, but to his surprise, it actually answered:

"I am not really sure. This has never happened to me before, either."

After a while, it added hesitantly:

"Have you... have you perhaps found a piece of a broken mirror somewhere?"

Something clicked in Sunny's mind.

"Broken mirror... Mirror Beast... Beastie..."

The Ascended Reflection! The shard of a mirror that the strange creature had left behind was still inside the Covetous Coffin... smeared with his blood...

'Crap!'

So the owner of the voice was the creator of the murderous Reflection Sunny had encountered on the Reckoning. That... that gave him as many questions as it had given him answers.

He couldn't really think about it right now, though, because the pressure of the Flaw was already building in his mind, forcing him to speak.

"Now that you mention it, I did, indeed, recently find a piece of a broken mirror. With the word "Beastie" written on it in a child's handwriting."

The voice remained silent for a while, then asked quietly:

"Oh? How exactly did you find it?"

Sunny did not answer for as long as he could, then reluctantly spoke:

"That mirror shard was left behind by a powerful creature I killed. I took it with me, thinking that it might turn out to be important."

This time, the voice was quiet for an especially long amount of time. When it finally spoke, there was a hint of anguish in it. The owner of the voice tried very hard to suppress it, but his pain seemed to be too deep to not seep into his words even slightly.

"...So it's dead. I see."

Then, it fell silent once again.

Sunny tensed. After a while, he asked carefully:

"You, uh... you're not going to be angry with me for killing your pet, are you?"

A deep sigh resounded from the void.

"Angry... with you? Why would I be angry with you? You are not to blame for what happened to us."

Sunny shivered, suspecting that whoever or whatever it was that had been responsible for the Mirror Beast becoming separated from its creator — and eventually dying by his hand — was extremely lucky that the owner of the voice had become one of the Lost.

Then, he asked cautiously:

"What... what exactly was it, though? I have never seen a creature like that."

The voice seemed more in control of itself when it answered after a few long moments:

"A manifestation of my Aspect Ability. A kind of an Echo, you can say. I... I created him when I was just a lonely kid. We were together for a long time, before... before we weren't anymore."

Sunny tilted his head, then frowned slightly.

"What do you mean, a kid? A kid with an Aspect Ability?"

The voice laughed bitterly.

"Ah, that... I had my First Nightmare when I was twelve. It's rare, but does happen sometimes. Few children survive the trial, though."

Sunny blinked.

'Being sent into the Nightmare at twelve... of course very few survive!'

He did know that, in extremely rare cases, the people infected by the Spell were outside of the usual age range. The entire first generation of the Awakened had been, for example. And there were cases of this anomaly to this day, even though it usually happened to someone older than the norm, not someone younger.

'And I thought that I was unlucky...'

He cleared his throat, then said awkwardly:

"Well... I am sorry for your loss. If it makes you feel any better, the creature tried to say something before it died. Uh... we never stopped searching. Something like that."

The voice, however, didn't respond. It seemed that its owner had once again spent all of his soul essence... or whatever it was that allowed him to communicate with Sunny... and was now gone for another few days.

Sunny sighed.

"Curse it! I didn't even have time to ask him how to survive the damned stars!"

More strategic with how he chose his words, damn it!

Sunny spent a few more days plummeting into the void. By now, he was having trouble remembering what it even felt like, to not be falling. The darkness seemed to be eternal and everpresent, as though he had always been here, in its empty embrace, and all of his actual life was just a strange dream.

'Maybe it was?'

No... no, it wasn't. He was almost sure.

By the time the voice returned, the void had changed slightly. Not only were the distant shimmering lights now closer and brighter, but it also felt as if the air was getting warmer.

Sunny was in his usual spot, sitting cross-legged in the center of the treasure chest and training to better control the flow of shadow essence. On the surface of the lid near him was a dark longbow and a quiver of black arrows.

"...You practice archery?"

Sunny opened his eyes and glanced into the darkness, then shrugged.

"Not really. But I hope to learn a bit of it soon."

He made a grimace and nodded toward his broken arm:

"I do need two functioning hands before I'll be able to, though."

The bow and the quiver of arrows were the same he had entrusted to Saint before. Both of the Memories were Ascended, but only of the first tier. The bow's enchantments made it incredibly strong and sturdy, while the only enchantment that the arrows possessed was that they came as a whole quiver instead of a single one.

His broken arm, meanwhile, was healing. He could already move his fingers, but the process was far from over. He was halfway there, though.

Sunny healed much faster than mundane humans, and even other Awakened. He was sure that in another week or so, he would be able to take off the splint and draw the black bow.

The voice lingered, then said:

"We had no time to discuss the divine flames last time."

Sunny nodded.

"Indeed."

Then, he remembered something and asked:

"Oh, by the way... what do I call you? Do you have a name? It's a bit awkward to keep thinking of you simply as the Voice."

The voice laughed.

"A name? I used to have a name, I guess."

Sunny sighed.

"Yeah? Well, what is it?"

The void lingered for a while, then answered with amusement:

"...Mordret. Or, rather... Prince Mordret, I guess."

Sunny opened and close his mouth a couple of times, then asked with suspicion in his voice:

"Prince? What are you the prince of?"

Mordret laughed.

"Nothing! I am a Prince of Nothing. Nothing at all..."

Chapter 439: Do or Die

Sunny stared into the darkness with an incredulous expression, then shrugged:

"Sure. Whatever. Nice to make your acquaintance... Your Highness. I am called Sunless, by the way. Sadly, no title."

Silently, though, he thought:

'...The young prince that the Dreamspawn had taken away?'

Oblivious to his suspicions, Mordret hesitated, then asked politely:

"Sunless? What an unusual name."

Sunny grimaced.

"Yes. My mother had a... on second thought, forget that! Are you going to tell me about the divine flame or not?"

The Prince of Nothing was silent for a bit, then said:

"There is not much to tell. The heat of those flames is absolutely deadly. Unless you have some way to fly, you are in big trouble. Which, I assume, you don't... otherwise, you wouldn't be in this predicament, to begin with. Right?"

'Well... you can't argue with sound logic, I guess!'

Sunny sighed.

"...I can control the direction of the fall, but yes, no true flight."

He hesitated, then added reluctantly:

"For what it is worth, my Aspect Ability allows me to turn incorporeal, as well as teleport for short distances."

He didn't really want to share the details of his powers with the mysterious prince, but currently, there was no other choice. Mordret obviously knew more about the Sky Below than Sunny, so his advice was vital.

The lost prince thought for a few moments, then said:

"Turning incorporeal will help against being cooked by the heat, but it won't save you from the divine flame itself. However, not everything is lost. Even though you can't fly, you do have some mobility. With some luck, you might be able to dodge the conflagrations."

Sunny glanced into the darkness with a resentful expression.

"That I already figured out myself. Tell me something that I don't know, genius."

The void chuckled.

"Fine. But only because you asked nicely..."

Then, it disappeared.

Sunny's face twitched.

"Goddammit! He's gone again!"

But a second later, Mordret's voice suddenly resounded from the darkness:

"No, no. There is still time. I was just thinking..."

He was quiet for a few moments, then said hesitantly:

"There is actually a path through the divine flame. An empty rift in the tapestry of stars where none of it remains. If you find it, you might survive."

Although it was hard to control his emotions these days, Sunny tried his hardest to suppress the misplaced anger and calm himself down. When he spoke, his voice sounded almost even:

"Why didn't you tell me sooner? How far am I from this rift, then?"

Mordret sighed.

"How would I know? It's not like I know where you are, exactly. More than that, I had never managed to find the rift myself. The Sky Below is vast and deadly, after all..."

'...So, he was exploring this abyss, too. Why? What's out there, beyond the fake stars?'

Sunny tilted his head, then asked cautiously:

"If you never found it, how do you know that it's there?"

The void remained silent for some time. After a while, when Mordret spoke again, his voice sounded distant and weak:

"The Tear... it should be somewhere near the Tear. I think..."

With that, Sunny felt that he was alone in the darkness again. This time, the mysterious prince was truly gone.

He sat motionlessly for a while, staring into the endless nothingness of the Sky Below.

"Near the Tear..."

The String of Fate, too, had pointed toward the Tear. To somewhere very near its center. If the rift in the annihilating field of the divine flames had anything to do with the golden thread, then Sunny had a much better chance of finding the path through the merciless stars than Mordret had ever had.

...He had already half-found it, really.

Looking down, Sunny sighed and closed his eyes again, returning to the endless routine of circulating the shadow essence through his body.

Day passed after day.

The closer Sunny drew to the obliterating stars, the calmer he became. Now that mortal danger was getting near, his mind had no time and reason to slowly destroy itself. The absolute nothingness of the void that had assaulted it, too, was much less empty now.

Not only was it full of threat, but also of heat and light.

And shadows...

Sunny had dismissed the leather elements of the Puppeteer's Shroud and undid the bands of its upper garment. Stripped to the waist, he meditated in the darkness, the Soul Serpent coiling around his pale and lithe body.

Because of the rough diet of only eating the poisonous meat of a dead devil, he had practically no fat left. His skin looked a bit feverish and was drawn tautly across his lean muscles, making for a sight that was both splendid and a little disturbing.

His broken arm had almost healed, so he removed the splint and spent some time every day doing simple exercises to bring it back to its former strength. He had to be cautious not to overexert it too soon, though.

The plan of how to survive the field of stars was slowly forming in his mind. It was bound to be a gamble one way or another, but Sunny was not going to give up without doing everything he could to survive.

...His confidence was somewhat reinforced by the fact that he had, most likely, discovered the rift that Mordred told him about.

Following the direction of the golden String of Fate that had been practically burned into his mind, Sunny studied a particular cluster of the stars for an entire week before finally noticing something that looked like a

tiny, almost imperceptibly minuscule gap in the vast tapestry of countless shimmering lights.

Trusting his judgment, he summoned the Dark Wing and used it to push the treasure chest toward that particular cluster. Luckily, he was already not too far away from it... most likely because he had been aiming to follow the golden string from the very beginning of his fall.

As a few more days went by and the stars grew even larger, Sunny became more or less certain that the tiny gap was, indeed, there. It had grown slightly bigger, too.

What he was uncertain about, however, was his ability to reach the rift without being incinerated by the annihilating heat of the divine flame.

The field of false stars was vast, and the rift was tiny in comparison. At the speed that he was falling, missing it would be far too easy.

But what choice did he have?

'Do or die...'

Well... when had it ever been any different?

Chapter 440: Merciless Stars | Shadow Slave

After more than three weeks of falling into the Sky Below — at least Sunny thought that it had been that long — he sighed and stood up, balancing on the dangerously swaying treasure chest.

His hair was wet with sweat, and his skin glistened in the piercing white light of approaching stars. By now, they did not resemble white dots in the boundless darkness of the abyss. Instead, each was the size of a fist, surrounded by a furious, blinding halo.

The heat permeating the void was suffocating.

Sunny stared down, at the ocean of white flames beneath him. If this was what remained of the inferno of heavenly fire after thousands of years of burning in an empty void... he shuddered to imagine what it must have looked like right after the hammer of divine punishment had fallen on the ancient land.

His gaze was locked on a small empty space between several radiant stars.

The rift.

This was his goal.

As Sunny stared darkly at the tiny patch of emptiness amid the vast field of flame, the void suddenly spoke:

"Have you... huh? Is that a... uh... what a large tattoo you have."

Sunny glanced at the darkness, then shrugged.

"What about it?"

Mordret lingered for a few moments, as though not sure what to say, then asked with amusement:

"Sunless... are you sure that you are a research assistant?"

Sunny grinned.

"Of course I am! Do you know how many contribution points they give me every month? I scribbled a few words about this and that, and that bought me a house. An entire house! Maybe being a researcher is not as swell as being a prince, but it's still a sweet gig... with all due respect, of course. Your Highness."

The void laughed.

"You are such an interesting person."

Sunny stared into the void with an incredulous expression.

"You are a bit of an enigma yourself, are you not?"

Mordret remained silent for a bit, then asked:

"Are you ready for what is about to come?"

Instead of answering, Sunny pointed to the ocean of merciless stars.

"Look there."

When the lost prince spoke, his voice was strangely regretful:

"I can't really see that well. What is it?"

'Oh... right.'

Sunny hesitated for a few seconds, then said:

"I think I found the rift you told me about."

Mordret asked with surprise in his voice:

"...Really? You found it?"

Sunny shrugged.

"We'll see. You said that it should be somewhere under the Tear, right? Since I fell right into the Tear, there's a chance that I'm right."

The void lingered, then said in a somber tone:

"What if you're not?"

Sunny smiled.

"Then it has been nice knowing you. Anyway... anything else you want to tell me before you go? I doubt that we'll have the opportunity to speak again before I reach the stars."

Mordred thought for a few seconds, then said:

"I might not be able to reach you at all after that. So... good luck?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Really?"

The voice of the void answered after a long pause:

"Yes. Why?"

He shook his head.

"Nothing, really. I just thought that you are stuck somewhere out there, beyond the stars."

Mordred chuckled.

"...No. I am stuck somewhere else."

His voice grew strangely distant. Then, an almost inaudible whisper reached Sunny's ears:

"I hope... survive... Sunless..."

Then, the lost prince was gone, leaving Sunny alone in the darkness once again.

He sighed.

"Me too. I hope I'll survive, too."

After Mordred disappeared, Sunny waited for a bit, and then broke the rule he had set for himself for a second time since starting this expedition — he summoned another Memory that should have been tied only to Mongrel.

The Mantle of the Underworld.

The intricate onyx armor weaved itself from sparks of darkness and covered him from head to toe. Sunny was not accustomed to wearing its closed helmet, since he was usually using Weaver's Mask instead, but it was not uncomfortable. His field of vision, however, became slightly constricted.

'Hopefully, no one will be able to see me this far into the abyss.'

Out here in the Sky Below, he felt as though no one, not even those who were attuned to revelations, could peer into his secrets and glean anything about them.

...The only exception to the rule was the Prince of Nothing himself. But he was gone now.

The Mantle possessed two enchantments that would most likely prove themselves to be extremely helpful soon. The [Stalwart] trait of the armor imbued it with high resistance against various types of elemental damage, including fire. Just seconds after donning it, Sunny felt the suffocating heat retreat, replaced by a pleasant coolness.

How long would that coolness last, he did not know.

The [Living Stone] enchantment, on the other hand, allowed the Mantle of the Underworld to repair itself while being worn. This trait would come into play later, helping Sunny protect himself even after the divine flame became intense enough to damage the onyx armor.

After that, Sunny summoned the dark longbow and the quiver of black arrows. By now, his hand had recovered enough for him to be able to draw the mighty bow... he just hoped that he would not need to.

Finally, he summoned the Cruel Sight and attached it to his belt.

...All preparations were now done.

Looking down through the narrow slit of the visor, Sunny sighed...

Now, everything depended on his resilience, luck... and how deep his reserves of shadow essence were.

In the stark darkness of the empty void, deeper than even the memories of a blue sky could reach, a cracked treasure chest was plummeting toward an ocean of searing white flames.

Its underside was bathed in the furious light, while its lid was drowning in the deepest of shadows. Wisps of smoke were slowly rising from its smoldering wood, and the strips of iron reinforcing it were slowly starting to glow as they turned orange.

Sunny, who had become a shadow and was once again hiding on the lid of the dead devil, felt fine... for now. Until the treasure chest was destroyed, he was protected from directly touching the light of the divine flame.

But how long would the corpse of the mimic last?

He was thinking about something else, though... something far more dreadful.

'The rift... the damned rift! I am going to miss it!'

Chapter 441: Ocean of Flame

Sunny almost managed to direct his endless fall toward the tiny gap between the remnant conflagrations of the divine flame, but on that incredible scale, even the smallest mistake was bound to take him many kilometers away from the goal.

...A mistake that he had inevitably made, since there were no lessons on navigating eternal voids, especially without any tools except for his own two eyes.

'Damn it!'

Right below him, swiftly approaching, was an ocean of obliterating light, heat, and fire.

The conflagrations themselves were rather small, no larger than a dozen meters in diameter, and chaotically scattered in the void at a considerable distance from one another. Each looked like a furious, undulant orb of dancing white flames.

The space between them, though, was not safe. It was permeated by immolating heat that nothing could withstand... at least nothing Sunny had at his disposal.

As the adamantine wood of the treasure chest started to slowly catch fire, he hesitated, then glanced at the empty darkness of the distant rift in the ocean of light. Whether by accident or by design, there was a point in the field of false stars where no conflagrations remained. A roughly circular breach was torn through them, promising him safe passage.

But how was he supposed to reach it?

If Sunny jumped off the plummeting chest right now, he would probably be able to glide all the way to the rift... the distance was just right. However, he was pretty sure that the Dark Wing would be instantly turned to ash by the terrible heat of the remnant vestiges of the divine flame.

Not to mention that he himself would probably get thoroughly cooked inside the Mantle of the Underworld if he remained corporeal for that long.

With a mental sigh, Sunny left the comforting embrace of the shadows.

A kneeling figure in an intricate onyx armor appeared on the lid of the smoldering treasure chest.

'Argh...'

Despite the protection of the [Stalwart] enchantment, the air he breathed in was thin and scoldingly hot. It almost felt as if he was inhaling fire. Other than that, however, the Mantle of the Underworld did a good job of keeping the heat at bay... and yet, Sunny could feel it starting to slowly get warmer. He didn't have a lot of time.

Standing up, he raised the dark longbow, nocked an arrow on its string, and gritted his teeth. Then, sending a thin trickle of essence into the muscles of his shoulder and back, he strained his body and drew the mighty bow.

...It felt as though he was lifting a mountain.

'...How the hell does Saint make it look easy?'

Feeling his muscles tremble, Sunny aimed toward the rift and hesitated for a second. After he did this, there would be no going back.

'What is there to go back to, fool? Aren't you sick of that damned chest?!'

Relaxing his hand, he let go of the string.

The black arrow shot into the darkness with incredible speed, instantly becoming illuminated by a blinding radiance. It was strange... the void was full of light now, but with nothing to reflect it, the Sky Below still appeared black and empty. Only when something entered the emptiness did the light become visible.

Sunny felt the chest sway, and struggled to keep his balance.

A couple of moments later, the fletching of the arrow suddenly caught fire and burned away. However, that didn't affect its flight too much. The arrow pierced the darkness and turned into a distant spark, covering almost an entire kilometer in just a few seconds. Then, however, it slowed down considerably, and its wooden shaft began to smolder.

It was time to move.

As Sunny felt flame licking his greaves, he held his breath... and used Shadow Step.

The arrow he had sent flying in the direction of the rift was wrapped into one of his shadows. As the shadow unfurled itself from the igniting shaft, Sunny shot out of it as if launched from a giant slingshot. As soon as he left the shadow, it instantly wrapped itself around his body, and then slid toward the quiver.

'Crap!'

Sunny found himself flying through the darkness with nothing to support or shield him from being directly exposed to the immolating radiance. The Mantle of the Underworld suddenly shone in the torrent of light, instantly growing considerably warmer. It wasn't burning his skin yet, but he suspected that there was not much time left before that happened.

Especially because his momentum was not only horizontal, but also vertical, and was becoming more so with each moment. He was still plummeting toward the ocean of flames, approaching it with terrifying speed.

The closer he got, the more obliterating the heat would become.

Twisting as he fell to orient himself in the void, Sunny nocked another arrow and drew the bow again. This time, it was considerably harder, since he had nothing to stand on and had to rely solely on the strength of his arms and shoulders.

Just in the few seconds it had taken him to draw the bow, the heat became much more destructive.

Another arrow flew into the darkness, and several seconds later, he used Shadow Step again, appearing almost two kilometers closer to the rift.

...It was still decently far away, though.

'Curses!'

Sunny flew through the obliterating darkness and struggled to nock another arrow. The glossy black surface of the Mantle of the Underworld was starting to glow, slowly turning incandescent. He was still fine inside, though. For now. If a little hot...

Another arrow disappeared into the darkness, and Sunny jumped through the shadows again.

This time, the jump devoured pretty much all of his remaining shadow essence. Whatever little there was left would not have been enough to repeat the process the fourth time.

However, maybe... just maybe... he wasn't going to have to.

After using Shadow Step three times in a row, and turning some of his vertical momentum into horizontal one with each jump, Sunny was now plummeting diagonally through the void, seemingly toward the very edge of the rift.

'I am going to make it... am I going to make it?'

Even if he would, it was going to be very, very close.

The string of the bow suddenly caught fire and broke with a loud ring. Dismissing the bow and the quiver, Sunny sent both of his shadows to reinforce the Mantle of the Underworld and threw his hands and legs to the sides. He was trying to create as much surface area as possible to utilize the resistance of the air in his favor.

He was well-versed in all kinds of falling and gliding thanks to using the Dark Wing so often, so this was not something new to him. Granted, he had never done it in a heavy armor.

Speaking of which...

Sunny hesitated, then directed some of his remaining essence into the Mantle of the Underworld to activate the [Feather of Truth] enchantment and make the armor as light as possible.

Then, all he could do was endure the growing heat and wait and watch as both the obliterating ocean of flames and the circle of saving darkness approached him at tremendous speed.

His life now depended solely on which of the two was going to swallow him first.

Chapter 442: Burning Heaven | Shadow Slave

Surrounded by a radiant halo, Sunny plummeted into the darkness. His breath was ragged and hoarse, and his eyes were blinded by the piercing shine of the immolating ocean of white flames beneath him.

Fearing that his eyes would be permanently blinded by it, he closed them, which helped a little.

'Hot... it's so hot...'

He was drawing closer and closer to the remains of the divine inferno, and as he did, the stonelike metal of the Mantle of the Underworld was growing hotter and hotter. Soon, its outer layer turned bright red. Then, it started to melt.

'Damn!'

Sunny directed more of his remaining essence through the coils of the Soul Serpent, activating the [Living Stone] enchantment of the Underworld armor.

As the onyx melted and cracked, causing him excruciating pain, the Mantle began to repair itself. Before anything could fully breach the surface of the incandescent onyx, the damage was undone.

...For now, the enchanted armor could heal itself faster than it was being destroyed. In large part due to being augmented by both of his shadows, perhaps.

Sunny encountered another problem, though.

It was getting harder and harder to breathe... not even because the air was scalding and hot, but because there was not enough of it.

Fire fed on oxygen, after all.

Luckily, Sunny was no stranger to being deprived of it. What's more, thanks to the Blood Weave, he could get by without breathing for much longer than most Awakened... and he suspected that he would have to do just that very soon.

Hopefully, he would be able to reach the rift shortly after that.

And speaking of the rift...

He carefully opened his eyes a little and glanced into the blinding inferno beneath, trying to judge whether or not he was going to make it. For now, it seemed that he would easily pass the field of fire and enter the dark emptiness... but that was just an illusion.

Sunny had to factor in that his forward momentum was constantly growing weaker, which meant that his trajectory would become more and more vertical the longer he fell through the searing abyss.

It was too hard to tell whether or not he was going to make it.

Gritting his teeth, he shifted his weight and lowered one hand, grabbing the hilt of the Cruel Sight. Then, he raised the silver blade to his chest, threw a cursory glance at his warped reflection, and activated the [Light Eater] enchantment of the somber sword.

Instantly, the mirror blade began to absorb the merciless light of the false stars, growing white-hot and incandescent. Sunny, however, found himself able to see once again. He even felt a little cooler, although it might have been just wishful thinking.

Surrounded by a strange bubble of darkness left behind by the devoured light, Sunny plummeted toward the obliterating stars.

'Almost! I'm almost there!'

By then, the conflagrations of the divine flame were so close that it seemed as though he could reach out and touch them. No matter how hard Sunny

tried, he couldn't draw in even a little bit of air into his lungs. The rift was so close...

But in the end, it turned out to be just a little bit too far.

Sunny reached the very edge of the field of flames. He only had to fly past one last cluster of conflagrations. However, his fall took him straight into the embrace of fire instead.

Sunny would have screamed if there was any air in his lungs. Moving at a terrible speed, he pierced right through one of the seething orbs and emerged from the other side of it, wreathed in white flame. A terrible pain enveloped his whole being.

But it wasn't physical pain... it was the similar kind of pain he had experienced while using the Broken Oath, only magnified a hundredfold.

'...shadows... my shadows!'

His shadows were wrapped around the Mantle of the Underworld, and so, they had been badly damaged by the divine fire. The armor itself had caught aflame and was now quickly disintegrating. The fire was spreading, too, threatening to envelop him whole.

Half-blind from pain, Sunny did the only thing that could save him now — he dismissed the onyx armor. The Mantle of the Underworld fell into countless sparks of darkness, which then disappeared, causing the fire to be extinguished.

Naked and hurting, Sunny fell into the darkness and saw the Cruel Sight crack, the silver of its blade becoming dull and tarnished. Following an instinct, he activated the [Dark Mirror] enchantment, and then dismissed that Memory, too.

Finally, he wrapped the wounded shadows around himself and circulated what little shadow essence he had left through his entire body, spending all of it to make himself more resilient...

And then, he felt cool wind touch his blistering skin.

Sunny fought through the terrible pain and opened his eyes.

Behind him, there was a wall of ruthless radiance.

But in front of him, there was nothing but darkness.

...He had reached the rift.

'Hurts... everything hurts. Crap... this is so unfair!'

Sunny flew deeper into the rift, creating more distance between himself and the conflagrations of the divine flame. Of course, they were too close for him to feel comfortable. But at least he could breathe again, and wasn't being cooked alive.

Well... at least not very fast.

Before being badly hurt by the divine flame, Sunny had hoped that somehow, miraculously, he would turn out to be immune to it. He was technically a shadow of a Sun God's descendant, after all. Why wouldn't he be immune to the manifestation of his master's domain?

Well... his master's indirect ancestor's domain, to be precise.

Plus, he was not just any shadow, but a divine one left behind by Shadow God himself. Light and shadows were two sides of the same coin, weren't they?

As it turned out, the divine flame didn't care.

'Argh!'

Currently, Sunny was falling through the rift. He had reached its center and dove straight down, hoping to stay as far away from the surrounding stars

as possible. It was as though there was a tunnel of empty darkness torn through the very heart of the field of flames, and he was following it down.

Down, down, down...

It was hard to even conceive of a world where he wasn't constantly falling down.

Now that he had no Mantle of the Underworld to protect him from the blaze, Sunny was suffering a lot. Rift or not, the air was still permeated by the unbearable heat. His skin was red, with patches of it blistering. Some of it was badly burned by his unfortunate clash with the divine flame and because he had not dismissed the burning Mantle of the Underworld fast enough.

It was not life-threatening, though.

...Yet.

'Come on! End, goddammit!'

But the field of flames showed no signs of ever ending.

Until it did.

After a while, when Sunny was on the verge of losing conscience from the constant heat, he noticed that the scattering of the immolating stars around him became a bit thinner.

And then, even more so.

And then, suddenly and without any warning, he fell out of the field of divine flame and found himself surrounded by nothing but blessed nothing once again.

...The radiant inferno was now above him, growing further away with each second. It looked as if...

As if heaven was on fire.

And beneath him...

Sunny looked down and shivered.

'What... how?'

His eyes widened in shock.

Chapter 443: Secrets of the Void

Out there in the empty darkness of the void... something even darker loomed, hidden from the radiant light of the ocean of flame above.

Sunny peered at the distant black silhouette and shivered.

'...What the hell? What is it doing here?'

Far below him, a small island cut from dark stone floated in the endless emptiness, surrounded by drifting slabs of shattered obsidian. A tall and magnificent pagoda stood in its center, built of a flawlessly black material that was neither wood nor stone. Its lusterless walls seemed to devour any light that touched them...

It was the perfect replica of the Ivory Tower... but at the same time its opposite. The two pagodas were so alike that for a moment, Sunny even thought that he had somehow found himself high up in the Sky Above.

But no.

The island that the Obsidian Tower stood upon was different. It was larger than the one every Awakened on the Chained Isles was used to observing in the skies, and had no broken chains hanging from its stone slopes. On its desolate surface, remains of mysterious structures could be seen, turned to ruin by the passage of time. Several obsidian pillars protruded horizontally from its edges, stretching into the empty void like strange wharves.

From high above, Sunny couldn't see much of the island in detail. But he was approaching it fast...

'...Crap!'

Too fast!

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then suppressed the desire to immediately summon the Dark Wing. The divine flames were still too close, and their

heat could damage the fragile Memory. He had to wait for a bit... there was still time.

Even if it was going to run out pretty soon.

Sunny continued to fall, waiting. With every minute, the heat of the immolating stars dissipated a little. And with each minute, the dark island grew closer and closer.

Finally, knowing that there was no more time to waste, Sunny summoned the Dark Wing and commanded it to turn his fall into a glide. The dragonfly cloak turned into a blur behind his back... but it also began to produce thin wisps of smoke, threatening to catch aflame at any moment.

'Curses!'

Supported by the enchantment of the Dark Wing, Sunny's descent started to slow down little by little. His speed, however, was too great to be nullified in a single instant. It was dropping swiftly... but was it swift enough to prevent him from splattering all over the surface of the mysterious island?

And was the transparent cloak even going to endure for long enough?

Sunny cursed and trembled as he watched the Obsidian Tower approach.

'Here goes nothing! Damn!'

In the end, he still landed with enough speed to shatter all bones in his legs from the impact against the ground. At the last moment, however, Sunny turned into a shadow and dove into the deep darkness enveloping the island instead. Safely embraced by the shadows, he submerged himself into them, and finally allowed his mind to relax.

'Safe... I'm safe...'

...He was finally safe.

For a few seconds, at least.

Sunny was in a world of pain.

His shadow essence was running out, too.

Also, he had no idea what terrifying danger was waiting for him on the mysterious island that remained hidden in the deepest reaches of the Sky Below for thousands of years, nor what deadly secrets waited for him inside the Obsidian Tower.

...But for now, he did not care. All he cared about was that he was not falling anymore.

'Bliss... this is pure bliss!'

Floating in the dark embrace of shadows, Sunny couldn't get enough of the fact that, for the first time in almost a month, he was... stationary. He finally had solid ground under his feet again! Metaphorically speaking, of course.

In any case, it was such a beautiful feeling.

Sunny allowed himself to relax and rested for a bit, safely hidden in the deep dark shadows.

After a while, he sighed and forced himself to turn his attention to the outside world. Moving closer to the surface of the deep darkness that embraced him, Sunny cautiously took a look outside.

'...Huh?'

Strangely, what met him was complete and utter silence.

There were no Nightmare Creatures on the island, no abyssal horrors, no terrifying beings to devour him whole. Not even a single unholy titan slumbered nearby, ready to wake up at the slightest disturbance.

The island seemed... empty.

Which was very fortunate, considering that Sunny was running very low on shadow essence and was going to have to assume his physical form soon.

He hesitated for a few moments, then took stock of his equipment and himself.

His soul was seriously wounded, but not beyond its ability to heal itself... in time.

His body was not exactly whole, but in somewhat of a splendid shape, considering all that had happened. He even had all his limbs intact.

Both the Mantle of the Underworld and the Cruel Sight, as well as the Dark Wing and Saint's bow were heavily damaged. Luckily, none of these Memories were completely destroyed. It was going to take a long time before he could use them again, though. Days... maybe even weeks.

On the bright side, Saint herself had recovered from the wounds received on the Shipwreck Island ages ago. Sunny actually could have summoned her at any point during his journey through the Sky Below, but there was no real reason to. Plus, the treasure chest would not have accommodated both of them, especially considering how much the living statue weighed.

The [Dark Mirror] enchantment of the Cruel Sight now also had two elemental augmentations for Sunny to choose from. Its runes showed:

Current Charge: Divine Flame.

Latent Charges: Soul.

'Divine flame, huh...'

Well, if there was one benefit from being burned by the damn thing, it was that now he would be able to cause similar pain to others. So, it was totally worth it in the end... no doubt about it...

'I guess we will have to see.'

And lastly... Sunny was now completely sure that the thing on the other end of the golden String of Fate was the Obsidian Tower. His intuition was calm and silent. That told him that he had arrived at his destination.

Somewhere inside, a thing that was deeply connected to his fate waited.

Glancing at the magnificent silhouette of the black pagoda, Sunny sighed... and left the safety of the shadows, emerging from them to step onto the surface of the island that no other human had visited in thousands of years.

If ever...

Chapter 444: Obsidian Tower | Shadow Slave

Sunny stood naked on the rocky surface of the dark island. He grimaced and looked at his body, which was a map of burns — some more severe than others — then summoned the Puppeteer's Shroud.

Not wishing for the soft fabric to touch the worst of his wounds, he left it the way it had been during the latter stages of his journey through the Sky Below, with the leather elements gone and the upper garment undone and tied around his waist.

This time, his body was wrapped in shadows and appeared black, as if cut from the same obsidian that the dark island consisted of. The coils of the Soul Serpent seemed to shimmer as the essence flowed through them.

A moment later, Saint stepped from behind him and moved forward, summoning the Midnight Shard as she walked. Knowing how badly his soul was damaged, Sunny decided to keep the Broken Oath locked away for a while, so the Shadow was not surrounded by the destructive aura anymore.

He was also not in any shape to fight himself, at least not very effectively, and that was why the austere tachi was currently in the hands of the taciturn demon. If push came to shove, Sunny would either use the Moonlight Shard or command the Soul Serpent to assume the odachi form.

With a heavy sigh, he summoned the Endless Spring and greedily drank the cold water from it, then leaned forward and poured some on his head. After that, he finally felt like a human once again.

...All in all, things weren't that bad. He was alive and in one piece, suffering from neither thirst nor hunger.

Here on the dark island, the air was pleasantly warm. Bright stars burned in the empty void high above, making for a beautiful view. Right in front of

them, the graceful silhouette of the Obsidian Tower rose from the ground like a black rift in reality.

It turned out to be much larger than Sunny had thought, but nowhere near the scale of the Crimson Spire. That cursed thing seemed to be too gargantuan to even exist, while the ancient pagoda was more or less fit to have been built for humans. Well... maybe for extremely tall humans. Or... tiny giants?

As Sunny studied the Obsidian Tower, Saint tilted her head and stared at the black pagoda, too, her ruby eyes reflecting some strange emotion. Was it... recognition?

Why would his Shadow recognize a tower hidden in the depths of the abyss below the Chained Islands?

'Strange...'

Sunny frowned, then dismissed the Endless Spring. He remained motionless for a few moments, then slowly headed toward the tall pagoda. Saint followed.

As they walked across the island, Sunny had time to look at the various ruins left on its surface.

It was hard to determine what they had been once, but Sunny got the feeling that he wasn't looking at the remains of buildings. More like... structures? Devices? Their purpose was now impossible to determine, but whatever it had been, he doubted that anyone could have ever lived inside.

The closest he could get to putting his feeling in words was that these ruins reminded him most of the bowels of the underground factory his mom had worked in when he was little. Even though the factory was much larger and built of alloy instead of cut blocks of obsidian, not to mention being much more advanced, the sensation was the same.

'...Just what was the purpose of this island? Who lived here? Who built that strange tower?'

The closer Sunny got to the Obsidian Tower, the more he was impressed by its graceful beauty. Even though the pagoda was hidden in the depths of the Sky Below, where very few creatures would have ever seen it, the unknown builder spent time to ensure that it replicated the magnificence of its Ivory counterpart perfectly.

It would have been breathtaking if it wasn't so... menacing.

Surrounded by nothing but emptiness and silence, the Obsidian Tower appeared ominous just by virtue of existing.

'I am not... not scared at all.'

He did, however, was thinking about one thing in particular...

Which tower was really the replica, and which one was the original?

The beautiful white pagoda that flowed high above the Chained Isles, or the menacing black one that hid in the darkness below?

Maybe he was going to find out...

Soon, Sunny and Saint approached the tall gates of the Obsidian Tower. Nothing attacked them, and no frightening sound came from inside, announcing that something that dwelled beyond the black gates was awakening in hunger. The pagoda was silent, just like the rest of the dark island.

The strange thing, though, was that Sunny could not feel any shadows on the other side of the massive door. Not because there weren't any, but because the walls of the tower seemed to shield the interior from his Shadow Sense.

A cold shiver ran down his spine.

'I have never encountered anything like this before. Have I?'

He hesitated, then approached the black door, summoned the Moonlight Shard, and scratched its surface. A layer of black dust fell down, revealing a

much harder, and even blacker surface beneath.

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

'...Soot?'

The entire pagoda was covered in a thick layer of soot. He stood motionlessly for a bit, trying to understand what meaning was there in this fact, then simply shrugged and studied the ancient gate.

The problem he was facing... was that the gate didn't have a handle to open. Neither did it have a keyhole, a bell to ring, or a knocker to announce his arrival.

'How the hell am I supposed to open it?'

Without Shadow Sense, he couldn't use Shadow Step to simply appear inside. So, for the moment, Sunny was stuck.

'It would be very, very funny to travel all this way only to find out that I can't open a damn door. Right?'

Slightly embarrassed, he looked at Saint and asked:

"Any ideas?"

He didn't really expect an answer from the taciturn demon, but to his surprise, the Shadow stared at him for a few moments, and then lowered her sword.

Then, she raised one hand and pointed to her eye.

Sunny observed all of that in complete bewilderment, then blinked a couple of times.

'Eye? What does she mean?'

Then, an idea came into his mind.

Turning back to the door, he put one hand on it, and then shifted his gaze in a similar manner he did when looking beneath the surface of Memories to look at their spellweave.

And there, beneath the obsidian surface of the tower's gate, he saw it.

A weave.

It wasn't the weave of ethereal threads he was used to seeing, though. Instead, it was a much cruder and more primitive version of it, created from very physical diamond strings that stretched beneath the stone surface, creating a beautiful, but simple pattern.

Sunny had only seen this type of weave one time before.

Inside Saint herself.

Back when she was just an Echo, he had noticed it hidden behind the radiant pattern of the spellweave. He had thought that it was what made the stone warriors alive, in the first place.

That it was created by the last child of the Unknown in the cavernous halls of his dark domain...

And that it might have been the precursor of the Spell itself, or maybe an imitation of it.

Was this tower built by the Lord of the Underworld too, then?

...Sunny hesitated for a moment, then moved his hand to a particularly bright nod of the diamond weave and sent a small amount of shadow essence into it.

For a moment, nothing happened.

And then, the gates of the Obsidian Tower opened.

Chapter 445: Respite | Shadow Slave

Visible only to Sunny, the diamond weave beneath the surface of the gate ignited with ghostly light. Almost immediately, a thin vertical crack appeared in the ancient stone.

Then, the gates silently opened, and a gust of wind hit Sunny in the back.

He took a few steps away, hiding behind Saint, and cautiously looked over her shoulder at the dark entrance.

Nothing was moving in the darkness. From what he could see, the interior of the Obsidian Tower seemed quite mundane. As soon as the gate opened, his Shadows Sense could finally penetrate the invisible barrier surrounding the graceful pagoda — it didn't detect any danger, as well.

It really did seem safe.

He waited for a few moments, then coughed and waved a hand in front of his face, trying to get the soot that had flown into the air away from it.

"Ah, well. Nothing to worry about, then. Let's go!"

Sunny glanced at Saint, lingered for a second, and added in a polite tone:

"...Oh, ladies first."

The taciturn demon turned her head slightly, stared at him with one ruby eye, then simply walked forward and stepped over the threshold of the ancient tower. Sunny waited for a few moments, and followed.

Tightly gripping the handle of the Moonlight Shard, he dove into the darkness that reigned behind the tall frame of the entrance, made a dozen steps forward, and found himself in a wide corridor that seemed to encircle the entire first level of the pagoda.

The corridor stretched both far to the left and to the right. Here and there, Sunny could see large doors leading to differently sized rooms that were situated in the direction of the tower's outer wall, all the way to the bends of the corridor. And right in front of him was an intricate wooden gate decorated with beautiful engravings.

Behind it was the central hall of the tower.

Sunny hesitated for a bit, then pushed the wooden gate, which opened easily and revealed a vast chamber on the other side.

'That smell...'

His eyes widened.

Behind the gate was a large hall with a very tall ceiling. As soon as the gate opened, glass lanterns ignited on its walls, filling the interior of the Obsidian Tower with ghostly blue light. There were various things in the hall, all of which demanded Sunny's attention.

There was a stand holding smith's tools and implements, all masterfully crafted from black obsidian and silver. A badly burned worktable with a scattering of beautiful soul crystals on its black surface. A stone wall with mysterious schematics cut into it, the cuts themselves so smooth and deep that he couldn't even begin to imagine what had left them behind, let alone what the schematics described.

There were strange devices forged from silver and black steel, some of which reminded him of astronomical instruments, but also very mundane things, like chairs, tables, and even something that resembled a very long bed.

All of it was perfectly preserved and immaculate, with not a speck of dust anywhere, cleaner than even his own house in the real world was... despite the thousands of years that must have passed since the Obsidian Tower was visited last.

It also all felt slightly... wrong. The sizes of everything were almost fit to be used by a human, but slightly different. The shapes of the handles of all the tools were slightly strange. The way the pieces of furniture and equipment were arranged in space filled him with a slight feeling of unease, even though he didn't know why.

...But Sunny did dwell on this for too long. Neither did his gaze linger on any of these items. His attention was pulled toward one specific place.

Not too far from him stood a simple wooden table. And on it... was all kinds of delicious food.

Juicy meat, freshly baked bread, succulent grapes, glass jars of exquisite wine, beautiful pots full of steaming tea, all of it waited for him, as if served only a few seconds ago.

Sunny's mouth watered.

'How is this possible? This has to be an illusion... right?'

Covered in layers of soot, sweat, and blood, he walked toward the table. His boots left black marks on the pristine floor of the hall. Arriving at his destination, Sunny reached out and grabbed a piece of bread with his dirty hand and greedily devoured it, then took one of the intricate silver goblets and filled it with wine.

The rest of the goblets clattered to the floor, thrown off the table by his careless movement.

Not paying it any attention, Sunny gulped down the sweet wine and laughed, sending breadcrumbs flying into the air.

"Ah... this is not bad, really..."

He would have preferred something without alcohol, but then again, this wine tasted so good...

There was a wide grin on Sunny's face, but also dirty traces left by tears. His shoulders trembled.

"This really hits the spot..."

He was aware of the fact that the food could have been full of poison, but didn't care too much. He was just too hungry, tired, and spent. His body and his soul both hurt too much. He was at his wits' end.

Refilling his goblet and grabbing a piece of perfectly roasted meat, he wandered away from the table and took another look at the large hall.

"There's no one here, right, Saint?"

The Shadow silently walked behind him, vigilantly looking around and keeping the Midnight Shard ready.

But there was nothing to use it against.

Sunny wandered for a minute or so, and eventually stopped near a large bed covered with black, lavish furs. Dropping the empty goblet on the floor, he hesitated a little... and then climbed into the furs.

'...Who's been sleeping in my bed?'

Sunny dismissed the Puppeteer's Shroud and lowered his heavy head onto a soft pillow.

He wanted to give Saint the command to stand guard, but there was no need. The taciturn demon was already doing exactly that...

Before Sunny could think about something else, the exhaustion of the past few weeks took over his mind, and, offering almost no resistance, it slipped easily into the embrace of darkness.

The first thing Sunny ended up doing after discovering the Obsidian Tower and finding his way inside... was falling on a bed and going to sleep.

He slept well.

Chapter 446: Relentless Destroyer | Shadow Slave

Sunny slept for a long time, the exhaustion slowly leaving his battered body. After a while, though, his consciousness rose from the deepest layers of slumber, summoned back by pain and thirst. With a sigh, he turned to his other side and tried to go back to sleep. After a few more hours of tossing and turning, though, Sunny was finally awoken by the loud sound of something crashing to the floor.

'...What is Saint doing?'

He reluctantly opened his eyes and sat up.

As Sunny's weight shifted, the bed beneath him suddenly broke with a loud crack. He rolled onto the floor with a startled yelp.

"Huh?!"

Standing up, Sunny looked at the broken bed, then at the hall of the Obsidian Tower, which was now submerged in darkness. A bewildered expression appeared on his face.

The room he had entered before had gone through a dramatic transformation while he was asleep. The magical lanterns were now extinguished, and everything inside seemed dilapidated and decrepit, almost on the verge of crumbling to pieces.

The magnificent tools and implements had rusted through and deformed, the worktable had collapsed under its own weight — that was the sound which had awoken Sunny — the food he had enjoyed yesterday had turned to dust. The pristine condition of the hall was gone, and now it was full of darkness, debris, and dirt.

It was as though eons had passed since he fell asleep.

A cold feeling appeared in his chest.

'...Have I slept for a thousand years?'

Remembering fairy tales where similar things often happened, Sunny felt a hint of horror, but then thought about it for a few moments and calmed down.

No, he had not... judging by how much shadow essence had accumulated in his cores, he slept for about twenty-four hours straight, which was a lot, but nowhere near a thousand years. Saint, who was keeping watch nearby, also didn't look as if she had been guarding him for a few centuries.

Instead, it was the pagoda itself that had aged. As if an invisible seal that had kept it untouched by the passage of time for all those thousands of years was now broken, and time was finally catching up with it.

Time was the most relentless destroyer, after all.

Sunny sighed with relief, then grimaced.

'Curses! I should have eaten more yesterday... much, much more!'

All that delicious food, wasted!

Shaking his head dejectedly, Sunny looked around, then accessed his own state.

His wounds were already much better than they had been the day before. The burns were still rather painful, but within his capacity to endure without being slowed down in battle... too much. A couple more days of rest, and he would be close to being fully functional again.

He was really hungry, though.

But that was going to have to wait.

Summoning the Moonlight Shard, Sunny gave Saint a command to follow, and went to explore the Obsidian Tower.

It took Sunny about an hour to fully explore the first level of the ancient pagoda. Some of the doors in the outer corridor had collapsed and turned to dust, some remained standing and required him to use a tiny bit of shadow essence to unlock them.

Behind the doors were all kinds of rooms. Most of them were empty, suggesting that the master of the tower had moved away a long time ago, taking all the valuable things with him, while some contained weathered debris and dust. Sunny spent a lot of time trying to understand what all these things had once been, by the damage done by the accelerated time was too extensive to even guess.

'...Such a shame.'

Feeling strangely disappointed, Sunny decided that it was time to move on to other levels of the tower. He still had to find the thing that had pulled him toward this place, as well as — hopefully — some means of returning either to the Chained Isles or to the real world.

The idea of being stuck on this island forever did not seem very appealing.

Especially now that there was no food anywhere around...

Not finding anything interesting on the first level, Sunny decided to explore further.

From the outside, it had seemed as though the Obsidian Tower had six levels, which really surprised Sunny. He had expected there to be seven. However, after finding two stairwells — one stair leading up, the other down — he realized that there was an underground level, too, which explained this small discrepancy.

Everything having to do with the Spell and the Dream Realm had a tendency to be tied to the number seven... except the gods, of whom there had been only six.

'I guess that's why they are called gods... no law can bind them. Not even such a weird and random law as all things coming in sevens.'

Sunny looked up, then looked down, and decided to explore the underground level first.

Letting Saint go ahead, he entered the spiraling staircase and descended into the depths of the dark island.

Unlike the ground level, the basement of the Obsidian Tower turned out to be one giant hall.

And in it...

Sunny recoiled.

For a second, it seemed as though hundreds of dismembered corpses were piled at the center of the hall, forming a morbid hill. But as Sunny took a step back and instinctively raised the Moonlight Shard, he realized that he made a mistake.

The bodies piled in the center of the chamber were not that of people. Instead, they were... dolls.

Hundreds of broken porcelain dolls, each the size of a human, were discarded in the underground hall. Their fragile bodies were shattered and broken, laying there like abandoned toys. Some were missing limbs, some were left with gaping holes in their torsos. Some had long ago turned into piles of small fragments, with not even their faces remaining.

But those faces that did remain...

Sunny tilted his head, then glanced at Saint.

Every broken doll had the same face, or rather, all of their faces looked alike... as if they were all imperfect copies of the same original.

They had the same flawless, inhumanly beautiful features that Saint had, only the craftsmanship behind the faces of the broken dolls seemed much less refined, as though the sculptor had not yet perfected his skill when creating them.

There all looked like Saint's lesser siblings.

...If Sunny ever had doubts that the Obsidian Tower had once belonged to a certain Underworld Demon, now there were none. The last child of the Unknown had clearly spent some time here. Was probably the one who had created the black pagoda, in the first place, for some mysterious purpose Sunny couldn't even begin to guess.

Then, however, his attention was drawn to something else.

The floor of the vast hall was covered by a thick layer of dust, which should not have been disturbed in a few thousand years.

...But it had been.

A set of fleet footprints led all the way from the bottom of the stairs, where Sunny was standing, to the pile of broken dolls, circled it, and then mysteriously disappeared.

Sunny stared at it for a few moments, surprised.

'Someone... someone had entered the Obsidian tower before me.'

Chapter 447: Primal Fear | Shadow Slave

Sunny stared at the footprints for some more, then frowned.

'How does this make any sense?'

The Obsidian Tower had been sealed before he opened its gates. After he did so, the magic that had preserved everything inside was dispelled, which meant that those doors had not been opened in thousands of years.

It wasn't that easy to gain entry into the pagoda, to begin with. Not even mentioning the fact that one had to travel through the Sky Below and find the only rift in the boundless ocean of divine flames, there was also the fact that the gate had to be open by pouring essence into the weave of diamond strings beneath its surface.

Sunny could only see the weave and understand its meaning a little because his eyes had been transformed by the drop of Weaver's blood. He assumed that there were other Awakened with similar abilities, but there had to be very, very few of them... and what were the chances that one would find their way to the dark island beyond the immolating sea of stars, which was hidden in the depths of this endless void?

And how would they enter the pagoda without causing its seal to break?

'Just who was it that snuck into the Obsidian Tower unseen? And when?'

It had to have happened long before today. Sunny knew for a fact that Saint would not have let anyone come and go without waking him up. Neither would his shadows: even when he slept, they were aware and vigilant.

So... it could have happened at any point in the thousands of years since the tower had been abandoned by its rightful owner.

For now, he had no answer.

Feeling a little apprehensive, Sunny approached the pile of broken dolls and studied them for some time. Saint came closer, too, and stared at them silently. Then, she poked one with the tip of the Midnight Shard and turned away indifferently, as if losing all interest in the porcelain mannequins.

'...I guess she doesn't care too much about lesser versions of her.'

Saint repeatedly shown her disdain toward things that seemed to be replicas of her kind. It had been the same with the Black Knight, and even with the walking colossus of the Forgotten Shore. Sunny clearly remembered how unimpressed his Shadow had been with the awesome stone giant.

Turning away from the broken dolls, Sunny looked around and noticed that the walls of the chamber were lined with massive glass vessels. Some were whole and some were broken, but all were empty. The glass was black and opaque, covered with a thick layer of soot... from the inside.

'...Weird.'

Not finding anything else of interest on the underground level, he returned to where he had started and rested for a while, drinking water from the Endless Spring and trying to suppress his hunger.

'This place is so... eerie.'

It was, indeed. The black tower stood at the edge of an endless void of darkness, empty and abandoned, with everything inside of it made out of nothing by an inhuman mind. It was not a very welcoming place... at least not for humans. Sunny stared at the ancient walls that surrounded him, and wondered about the secrets of the past.

After a while, he stood up and cautiously headed for the second level of the great pagoda.

...As soon as Sunny set foot on it, though, he instantly felt that something was very, very wrong there.

The feeling of deep, subtle, primordial terror he suddenly experienced was unlike anything he had known before... with the exception, perhaps, of those few moments back on the Forgotten Shore when the walking colossus had lifted the giant three-eyed skull from the depths of the dark sea.

But here, this feeling was even more dire, even more invasive.

'What... what is this...'

Just like the underground level, this one consisted of only one great hall. The black walls rose high into the darkness, creating a magnificent and solemn atmosphere. At the center of it, cut into the obsidian floor, was a massive silver brazier. And in it...

Sunny shuddered and took a step back.

Something was... growing from the brazier, spreading outward like a vile kind of rot. It had infected the very stone of the ancient tower, turning it into a semblance of repulsive, black, pulsating flesh. The silver brazier was infected by the terrifying growth, too, its metal somehow becoming a part of it. It seemed as if everything would become absorbed and transformed by the spreading corruption as long as it was touched by the harrowing growth... entire worlds would be devoured by it, perhaps, if given chance.

The thing slowly spreading from the ancient brazier felt like... pure evil.

Sunny shivered, gave Saint a signal to stay back, and shifted his gaze slightly. He was looking past spreading black flesh, at the source of this harrowing infection.

At the very center of the brazier, blackened by the flames that must have raged in it once, lay a severed human arm. Well... it resembled that of a human, at least.

The arm was much longer than it should have been, and the hand had seven fingers that ended with sharp claws. The rot seemed to be spreading from a terrible torn wound on the forearm, to the charred and emaciated flesh, and then outward, to everything else around it.

Despite the repugnant state of the severed arm, the cut that separated it at the shoulder seemed clean and perfectly smooth, as if delivered by a steady and unfaltering blade.

But Sunny was more affected in something else.

A deep frown appeared on his face when he noticed it...

In his mind's eye, the vile arm was radiating a blindingly bright, overwhelming, beautiful golden radiance.

It was awash in the light of divinity.

A frightening thought appeared in Sunny's head.

'Can... can it be?'

In front of him, stricken by the harrowing rot, was... a severed arm of a deity.

...It was also the reason why fate had brought him to this lost and forgotten corner of the abyss.

Chapter 448: Golden Needle | Shadow Slave

Sunny stared at the severed arm of an unknown deity, then at the harrowing, profane rot spreading from it. Then, he tiredly rubbed his face.

'...Why can't anything ever be easy?'

He was sure that his fate was somehow connected to that arm, which meant that he was going to have to get to it somehow. But Sunny was also sure that there weren't enough rewards in all of the universe to make him go anywhere near that rot, let alone touch something infected by it.

He had the feeling that this thing was way, way out of his league.

In fact, he suspected that a divine being had ruthlessly severed their own arm because even someone as powerful as that had no means to resist that spreading corruption.

What was Sunny supposed to do, then?

Well...

Trying to remain as far from the rot as possible, he studied it for a while before coming to a strange conclusion... or rather, a strange question.

If the corruption was so terrible, then why had it not spread through the entire tower? Why had it only managed to crawl a few meters out of the silver brazier, turning a small portion of the second level of the pagoda into its flesh?

'Scratch that. Why didn't the whole island become one giant chunk of rotten black... whatever the hell that thing is?'

The answer was not hard to guess. It was because the rot, just like everything else inside the tower, had been sealed away from time for thousands of years.

And now that Sunny had broken that seal...

His frown deepened as he glanced at the silver hearth that was overgrown and had become a part of the spreading rot.

Now, there were only two possibilities. Time was going to catch up to the devouring corruption, and it was either going to slowly consume everything... or starve and die.

Could that thing last for thousands of years with nothing to feed on except for cold stone? Did it need to feed on flesh and souls, or would anything do?

'...I guess I am going to find out.'

Keeping an eye on the patch of harrowing rot, Sunny tried to suppress his fear and took a step forward.

It didn't seem like the rot was spreading. At least not yet.

In any case, he wasn't going to get closer to it. But he also knew that if the worst happened, he had no tool at his disposal that would save him. If that thing began to grow, slowly spreading across the whole of the Obsidian Tower, and then across the whole island, Sunny was simply going to die. Probably jump down into nothingness to avoid becoming a part of that... thing.

There was nowhere else to retreat to in the Sky Below, after all. And he doubted that he would be able to find a second secret island out there in the void...

So, his only hope was to find something inside the pagoda to save him. He had to explore further...

Plus, there was a possibility that the rot would swiftly wither and die. Not that Sunny would bet on it.

Pressing his back against the cold obsidian, Sunny dismissed Saint and skirted around the outer wall of the great hall until he reached the staircase

that led higher, to the third level. There, he summoned the taciturn demon again, hesitated for a bit, and then left one of his shadows to keep an eye on the devouring rot.

Feeling irrational panic at the thought of turning his back to the silver brazier, Sunny gritted his teeth, and then cautiously ascended the spiraling stairs.

As soon as the terrible thing disappeared from view, he let out a relieved sigh and realized that his entire body was covered in a cold sweat. Raising a trembling hand, Sunny wiped his face, and then continued to climb higher.

Saint being by his side gave him a little confidence, at least. The Shadow seemed absolutely unperturbed by the horrific visage they had left behind.

'...I bet fear can't even fit into that stone head of hers. Do Shadows have the ability to be afraid?'

He didn't know whether or not Saint could feel fear, but the gloomy shadow certainly could. In fact, behind its haughty exterior, it was rather cowardly. He was sure that the bastard would have been trembling all over if not for the fact that it was currently wrapped around his body.

Trying to distract himself with these thoughts, Sunny entered the third level of the Obsidian Tower... and froze, dumbfounded by what he saw there.

'I... I see. Wait, no. What the hell am I looking at?'

The chamber he found himself in was smaller than the previous three halls he had explored — mostly because the pagoda narrowed the higher it went, but also because the level was separated into several chambers.

And in that chamber in particular, dozens of porcelains arms floated in the air, each at a different level of being disassembled into tiny parts.

It was as though someone had stolen them from the pile of broken dolls in the basement of the Obsidian Tower and then brought them here to... to do what, exactly?

Sunny stared at the floating garden of disassembled arms, and then walked closer. He felt as though he was in some bizarre anatomy museum...

As it turns out, the porcelain dolls were much more complex than he had thought. In their disassembled state, their limbs showed how intricate the design was, and how many moving parts went into making each one as functional and articulated as that of a human. The joints, in particular, seemed like a marvel of engineering... not to mention the incredibly delicate weave of the diamond string beneath.

Even spelltech automatons could not boast of that level of ingenuity and intricacy.

But why were these arms brought here and taken apart? Who had done it? The Prince of the Underworld himself?

It didn't look like it... why would he need to study his abandoned creations?

It all became clearer when Sunny reached a stone pedestal standing at the far end of the chamber and saw a faint golden light emanating from a small object laying on it.

On the surface of the table were numerous parts that had been scavenged from the disassembled porcelain arms, several skeins of beautiful diamond string... and a long, narrow needle.

It was the needle that gave off a faint, weak radiance.

Sunny looked at the needle, then glanced at the floating porcelain arms, noting for the first time that each was missing a part or two.

Finally, different pieces of information connected in his mind, and he felt that he understood something about what had transpired in the Obsidian Tower.

Sometime after the Prince of the Underworld had left this hidden island — perhaps years, or perhaps thousands of years — an uninvited guest had snuck into the black pagoda like a thief, somehow getting past the closed

gates without ever opening them or disturbing the seal that had been preserving this place from being ravaged by time.

That thief was a divine creature themselves... and also horribly wounded. One of their arms had been torn open and infected by the spreading rot that no one, not even a deity like them, could expel.

That was why the thief had severed their infected arm at the shoulder and tossed it into the divine flame that had been burning in the silver brazier on the second level, and then went down to the basement to collect limbs from the broken porcelain dolls. It was that deity that had circled the pile of them and left the footprints in the dust for Sunny to notice.

In the end, the thief ascended to the third floor and fashioned a new arm for themselves from the parts of the Prince's discarded mannequins... and then sewn it onto their body with the diamond strings threaded through a sharp needle.

...That was the needle Sunny was currently staring at, and the divine light on it was emanated by the remnant traces of the thief's blood still left on its surface.

But who was the thief? And why was Sunny connected to their severed arm by a golden String of Fate?

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then reached for the needle... but suddenly froze.

The shadow left behind to monitor the harrowing rot had noticed something.

The black, ulcerous flesh... was changing.

Chapter 449: Thousand Years of Hunger

'Here we go...'

Sunny faced the stairwell and stood motionless, looking at the black rot through his trembling shadow. Sensing something, Saint turned around, too. The tip of her sword hesitantly rose into the air.

The next few moments were going to decide whether he was going to live or die... or maybe be condemned to a fate much worse than death.

One level lower, the harrowing corruption that had been spreading from the severed arm of a deity was moving. The black ulcerous flesh was rising and falling, as if in the throes of... death? Or transformation?

Sunny gritted his teeth, waited for a second...

And then breathed out with immeasurable relief.

'Dying... it's dying.'

It felt as though he had been sentenced to execution, only for a pardon to arrive at the last possible moment, when the rope was already pressing on his neck.

Indeed, the terrifying rot was withering. As thousands of years that passed since it was locked in the Obsidian Tower caught up with it, the devouring corruption appeared to be dying of starvation. The stone surface assimilated into it convulsed and wriggled, as if consumed by pain. The silver brazier was melting.

The growths of the bulbous black flesh were slowly receding, their color turning ashen. The process was slow, but at the edges of the patch of corruption, the rot was already turning into... into wisps of darkness, which then disappeared without a trace.

As tension left Sunny's body, he couldn't help but sway a little.

'Good... something has gone my way, at last.'

Before, he had been considering his options and finding no possible way to escape from the rot if it was to start spreading.

He had considered trying to damage it with Broken Oath, but doubted that anything the Awakened Memory could do would work, considering that even the original owner of the seven-fingered hand resorted to severing their limb completely instead of trying to destroy the spreading corruption.

He had also entertained the idea of using the Cruel Sight, which was now infused with divine flame. But something told Sunny that the massive brazier where the rot had taken root had once been full of it, too... that was apparent from how charred the severed arm of the transient deity was.

If even thousands of years of burning in annihilating divine flame couldn't destroy or stop the black rot, then what hope did he have?

In the end, though, the corruption had destroyed itself. Neither divine flame nor an actual deity had been able to damage the black rot, but its hunger — and the relentless nature of time — were.

'Thank gods...'

Sunny inhaled deeply and tiredly closed his eyes.

The corruption was slowly dying, pieces of it slowly disappearing, bit after bit. All that was left behind were the damaged stone and the memory of primal horror.

He grimaced.

'But also, damn the gods! Why would they allow for such a thing to exist...'

Shaking his head, Sunny wiped the sweat off his face, then turned around and walked back to the stone pedestal.

Reaching with one hand, he picked up the long, sharp needle and stared at it for some time.

The needle seemed to have been made out of polished iron, but due to the traces of divine blood absorbed by it, the cold metal had assumed a faint golden shine. Sunny looked at it for a long time, trying to understand if this was a mundane item or some mystical artifact.

In the end, he had to admit that he had no clue.

The needle did not turn into a Memory like Weaver's Mask had. He didn't see any spellweave inside of it, either. However, the needle also didn't feel like a simple object. It was... strange.

He thought for a bit, then summoned the Covetous Coffers and carefully placed the needle inside. The skeins of diamond string also went in, easily disappearing into the gluttonous box.

'I will have time to study it later...'

With that, Sunny hesitated for a bit, then reluctantly headed back toward the second level of the great pagoda.

He was going to watch the harrowing rot die, and then try to approach the severed hand of the mysterious deity.

Some time later, Sunny was sitting on the lowest step of the stairs leading to the great hall, staring at the massive brazier in its center.

What was left of it, to be precise.

The devouring corruption took its sweet time dying. Even the hunger of thousands of years could not destroy it so easily, it seemed. The black flesh writhed and pulsed, disappearing little by little.

Several times, veins of rot tried to spread outward, clearly sensing the presence of a living being nearby and lusting to absorb it... him. But the profane infestation was too weak to overcome the entropic power of starvation.

The silver brazier, which had long ago become a part of the horrid corruption, melted and fell apart, then disappeared into wisps of pure darkness. Soon, it was clear that the rot was not long for this world.

All that remained from its vile flesh were a few growths infused into the severed arm itself.

Staring at the disintegrating rot, Sunny felt both deep, primal terror and a strange compulsion to try and damage it a little in hopes of being credited for the kill by the Spell.

Who knew what reward he would receive?

But in the end, Sunny remained still.

Firstly, because he wasn't even sure that the corruption would be acknowledged by the Spell as a creature. He didn't really know if that thing was... alive, for the lack of a better word. If it was an entity, a process, or a manifestation of some profane law that he didn't know of.

Secondly, because he was absolutely unwilling to approach the rot, even now that it was dying. He wasn't even willing to let his Memories get anywhere near it. The Memories were connected to his soul, after all. Who knew if that thing was capable of spreading to a Memory, and then to his very soul through the invisible link?

So, Sunny simply sat silently and waited.

After a while, the corruption finally died.

The charred flesh of the severed arm became ashen, crumbled into dust, and finally disappeared in wisps of deep, impenetrable darkness.

All that remained was the empty hall, the patch of mangled obsidian in its center... a single piece of pristine alabaster bone shining with blinding gold radiance.

A sole phalanx of a finger.

Sunny waited for a few minutes, gathering his courage, then sighed and stood up. He glanced at the small bone, scowled, and walked toward it.

...It was time to see what fate had in store for him.

Chapter 450: Alabaster Phalanx | Shadow Slave

Sunny stepped into the patch of mangled obsidian and slowly approached the alabaster phalanx, then knelt beside it and lingered, studying its golden shine.

He was trying to determine if any sign of the harrowing rot remained, but also felt pulled toward the radiant bone and found it hard to look away.

'All of this insanity, just for that little piece of bone. What secrets does it hold?'

He hesitated for a moment, then reached down and picked up the phalanx.

Sunny had instinctively expected it to crumble into a torrent of white sparks and hear the Spell proclaim that he had acquired a new Memory, just like what had happened with Weaver's Mask... that Memory being, perhaps, another Drop of Ichor.

But nothing of the sort happened.

The bone felt cold and smooth to the touch. There was still marrow inside, wet and infused with bright golden radiance. Sunny tilted his head, stumped. What was he supposed to do now?

In hindsight, the fact that the phalanx was not going to turn into a Memory was rather sensible... obvious, even. After all, Memories were simply copies of real items recreated by the Spell, just like Echoes were copies of actual creatures — or items conjured by it from scratch following some unknown principle.

This, however... this was the real deal.

The alabaster bone had nothing to do with the Spell. It wasn't a recreation, it was... the original.

Sunny frowned, feeling unsure about how he was supposed to proceed.

Then, a certain scene suddenly appeared in his mind. Back in the ruined cathedral of the Dark City, Saint stood above the rusted remains of the Black Knight, holding a black gem in her hand. With a hint of some dark emotion burning in her ruby eyes, she raised the gem to her mouth, and bit into it.

Before he could fully process the implications of this image, Sunny followed a strange instinct. Without allowing himself time to think about it, he opened his mouth, put the phalanx inside... and swallowed it.

'What?!'

He blinked a couple of times.

'What did I just do?!'

Sunny stared at his empty hand, in which a divine bone had been just a few seconds ago, with wide eyes.

And then... it was as though a furious fire ignited in his chest.

'Crap!'

Sunny tumbled to the floor, feeling a harrowing pain permeate his entire being. It was the unbearable agony he knew and remembered all too well... the feeling of his very nature being forcibly changed into something that it was never meant to be. That nothing was ever meant to be...

Or maybe simply not allowed to.

It was the opposite of the euphoric sense of rebirth the Awakened experienced after completing the First Nightmare or returning from the Dream Realm for the first time... the feeling of your whole body being torn apart and reassembled, only to be torn apart once more.

"Argh! Here... here we go again!"

The torturous suffering he was experiencing was very similar to what he had gone through after consuming the drop of Weaver's blood. Back then, it had felt as though every muscle, every fiber, every molecule in his body were destroyed and recreated over and over again, becoming slightly different with each time. The agony had been especially excruciating when it came to his eyes, which had felt as though two white-hot rods were inserted into them...

This time was different.

The pain was concentrated in his spine, in his bones, in the marrow permeating them. His fingers in particular felt as though there was molten, incandescent, liquid metal flowing through them.

Sunny shrieked.

"Damn it! God damn it! Damn it all!"

It hurt so much...

However, the torture did not last as long as it had back in the branches of the Soul Devouring Tree. After a few more minutes of it, Sunny felt the Blood Weave suddenly come alive and rush through his veins, absorbing the harrowing heat and then carrying it to every cell of his body. Slowly but surely, the pain lessened.

But the process of transformation continued.

Sunny sprawled on the floor, covered in sweat and breathing heavily. He could feel himself changing... it was a strange and extremely unpleasant sensation, one suffused with a feeling of profound wrongness, but not as devastatingly excruciating as it had been just a few seconds ago.

"Hell, that was... rough."

His voice was hoarse and creaky.

Sunny glanced to the side and noticed Saint, who was standing silently above him and looking away with cold indifference.

'Such heartlessness! No sympathy at all...'

At least the happy shadow seemed very concerned about him... or itself. It was pacing nervously, turning to Sunny from time to time and timidly offering its encouragement.

The gloomy shadow was currently wrapped around his body, so it couldn't offer any feedback. He had no doubt that it would have just mocked him, anyway.

'That jolly guy is... really irritating! I would rather be mocked, curse it all!'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny closed his eyes and endured the unpleasant feeling of his body being demolished and reconstructed as best as he could.

After a long while — which felt like an eternity — it was all finally over.

A deep feeling of relief spread through Sunny's body. It felt... more solid, somehow. Strong, firm...

Resilient.

'Just what have I...'

The voice of the Spell suddenly thundered in the solemn dark hall, interrupting his thoughts.

Was he imagining it, or had there been a note of dark excitement in it?

It said:

[One of your Attributes has evolved.]

[You have acquired a new Attribute.]

'You don't say!'

Sunny struggled to sit up, and then hurriedly summoned the runes.

'What... what have I done to myself this time?'

The runes shimmered in the air in front of him, and Sunny quickly looked at the cluster describing his Attributes.

Attributes: [Fated], [Ember of Divinity]...

'Wait... ember?'

This was new. He concentrated on the [Ember of Divinity] and studied the string of runes:

Attribute Description: [Deep within your soul, an ember of divinity shines, almost ready to erupt into a radiant flame.]

'Huh... so I have an even higher affinity to divinity now. Makes sense...'

He had just swallowed a phalanx of an actual deity, after all...

Impatient, Sunny turned back to the list of Attributes, where three more remained. The first two he knew all too well...

[Child of Shadows], [Blood Weave].

But the third one was new. At the very end of the list, several new runes appeared. Sunny held his breath, and read:

Attribute: [Bone Weave].

Chapter 451: Bone Weave | Shadow Slave

'Bone Weave...'

Sunny let the sound of it echo in his mind, overwhelmed by a feeling of savage joy. He didn't know what that Attribute gifted him, yet, but was certain that it would be something special. The Blood Weave had saved his life so many times, after all...

And after his encounter with the Mordant Mimic, he learned that having strong bones was as important as having tenacious blood.

Shifting his gaze away from the runes, he stared at one of his hands, then made a fist. This was the arm that had been shattered by the vile creature, and then slowly healed while he was falling into the Sky Below. Even though Sunny had already been able to use it for the past few days, it used to feel weak, awkward, and slightly damaged.

But now, it was as good as new.

...More than that, actually. It was better than ever before.

All of his bones felt much more durable and resilient. Stronger. His joints seemed to be slightly more agile, too. His teeth felt as though they could crush stones and cut through metal.

The strangest change, however, happened to his fingers. It wasn't very apparent, though. On the surface, it simply felt as though they had grown subtly more sensitive, the tactile feeling of touching things becoming deeper and richer. However, Sunny suspected that the true change was more profound. He just didn't know what it was, exactly.

Blood Weave had altered his eyes in a very fundamental way, so Bone Weave had to have a lot of promise.

He ran his fingers across the soft surface of the Puppeteer's Shroud, vividly feeling the silken fabric slide against his skin.

'...Neat.'

Then, Sunny stretched his limbs, sensing their newfound agility. He was already weirdly limber due to practicing Shadow Dance, which demanded the utmost level of pliability from the practitioner's body. Now, however, it was even further enhanced.

Satisfied, Sunny turned back to the runes and read:

Attribute: [Bone Weave].

Attribute Description: [You have inherited a part of Weaver's forbidden lineage. Your bones have been altered and imbued with steadfast temperance...]

He tilted his head, stunned by the somewhat expected, but still profoundly fascinating piece of information he just received.

'Weaver's legacy!'

So the severed arm had actually belonged to the mysterious Demon of Fate. It was Weaver who had snuck into their sibling's tower while bearing a terrible wound, sliced off their rotting limb, and then fashioned a new one from the parts scavenged from the broken porcelain dolls before sewing it onto their body with diamond strings.

It was Weaver's footprints that Sunny had seen in the basement of the great obsidian pagoda.

He trembled.

Even though Sunny had seen many incredible things and lived through many unlikely events, both wondrous and terrifying, he suddenly felt awe. It was as though... as though he was suddenly in the presence of divinity.

Demon of Fate had been to this dark island, had walked the same halls that Sunny walked, and breathed the same air. The sharp needle infused with remnant traces of their blood was currently inside his storage Memory, as

well as the diamond string they had used to sew a new arm to their body. Unlike the miraculous black mask, the needle was not a Memory, either.

It was the actual thing.

But most of all... Sunny had swallowed a phalanx bone of the divine being in question.

'Crazy! This is crazy!'

He blinked a few times, then suddenly thought:

'Was, uh... was this how Neph felt when she first met Kai, I wonder?'

What a random and ridiculous thought...

Then, a slight frown appeared on his face.

...Why would Weaver secretly come to their younger brother's abandoned workshop? What was the harrowing rot that had been spreading from their wound, and what manner of creature could have wounded them so terribly?

What could even damage a deity?

Sunny had so many questions...

Luckily, the description of the Bone Weave was not over. Several strings of runes still remained.

He concentrated and read:

[...When children of the -unknown- rebelled against the gods, Weaver was the only one to refuse the call of war. Despised and hunted by both sides, they disappeared. No one knew where Weaver went and what they did... until it was too late.]

Sunny shivered.

A few things became more clear from this short description. Firstly, it cemented his suspicion that, at some point in time, the seven daemons — children of the mysterious -unknown-, who were also strangely described as having created themselves — had waged war against the gods. Or, rather, six of them... since Weaver apparently decided to not join either side in this conflict.

Secondly, Weaver's reluctance to participate in the war had landed them in big trouble with both the gods and the other daemons... unsurprisingly. One side would have seen the Demon of Fate as one of the enemies simply by virtue of them being a daemon, while the other would have seen them as a traitor... for that same reason.

That could potentially explain how Weaver ended up being ghastly wounded, and why they had to sneak into the Obsidian Tower in secret.

These two pieces of information were extremely fascinating, but it was the third one that gave Sunny pause.

'No one knew what Weaver did... until it was too late.'

That sounded so ominous. That made it seem as though Weaver alone had turned out to be more terrible than both the six daemons and the six gods combined, in the end.

What exactly had Weaver done?

Sunny really wanted to know the answer to this question, and not only out of idle curiosity.

He was carrying two parts of Weaver's lineage inside of him now, after all.

...The lineage that was described as being forbidden.

Was the reason for that connected to what Weaver had done?

Just as always, the answers Sunny had received brought him a swarm of new questions.

'Curses!'

With a sigh, he dismissed the runes and stood up. There was no sense in pondering about that now, not without finding more information, both about the daemons and the gods.

After all that had transpired, he was incredibly tired and hungry.

...But mostly hungry.

With a resentful sigh, Sunny gave Saint a sign to follow and headed back toward the first level.

Chapter 452: Above and Beyond

Several days later, Sunny was sitting on a piece of broken furniture in the central hall of the first level of the Obsidian Tower. The Covetous Coffers stood near him, its lid open and its sharp teeth revealed.

He was holding the Cruel Sight in his hand. The silver blade of the somber spear was incandescent with white radiance, infused with divine flame.

...Sunny was currently using said divine flame to roast a piece of repulsive, slightly rotten black meat. That was the last piece of mimic's flesh he had stored inside the Coffers before taking a plunge into the ocean of merciless stars.

Saint was also nearby, staring into the distance with her usual cold indifference.

He glanced at her, then sighed.

"Sorry that I haven't fed you in a while."

The Shadow did not react to his words in any sort of way.

Sunny continued to talk, though, unbothered by the taciturn demon's apparent lack of interest.

"Hey, that's not true! It is not my fault. Blame my incredible luck, instead. What can I do, the Memories I find are just too incredible. How can I let you eat them... I can't..."

He grinned, then threw a dubious look at the sizzling black meat, and sighed.

"I guess it's done..."

Dismissing the Cruel Sight, Sunny brought the meat to his mouth and took a bite out of it. As he chewed, an absolutely miserable expression appeared

on his face.

"...Ah, that's the stuff. I tell you, Saint, this meat absolutely delicious. I pity you, really, for being unable to taste this divine... oh damn it, how can anything be so vile!... this divine dish. It's the best devil steak you can possibly eat in a lifetime. Just a single bite... can really... change your life..."

'For the worst!'

At least chewing the damned thing was much easier now. Before the acquisition of Bone Weave, eating mimic's meat felt like gnawing on an old leather boot. It felt pretty much the same now, but Sunny's teeth were different.

They were able to slice and cut through the tough meat of the devil with ease.

Plus, it wasn't raw. That was already a reason to celebrate.

Feeling his eyes tearing up from disgust, Sunny glanced at Saint and forced the smile to remain on his face.

"I see you are left speechless by my culinary skill. Fair, fair..."

However, in the next moment, a voice suddenly resounded in the darkness of the Obsidian Tower:

"...You actually survived!"

Sunny choked on a piece of the vile meat. For a second, he thought that his loyal Shadow had only been pretending to be mute all this time, instead simply choosing not to speak to him...

But no, he recognized the voice.

Sadly, it wasn't Saint...

It was Mordret. The Prince of Nothing was back.

'Thank gods!'

Sunny had been burdened by being all alone on the dark island much more than he was willing to admit. Even though he didn't trust the mysterious voice, he felt relieved to hear it.

Swallowing the meat, he took a sip from the Endless Spring, then looked around the hall and said:

"As you can see. Although, being the honest to a fault young man that I am, I have to admit that it wasn't easy... or pleasant. In fact, I can hardly believe that I survived myself."

He glanced at his body, which was still in a rather sorry state. His burns were healing, but much slower than they would have usually healed. Even though the divine flame had not touched him directly, just the heat radiated by it was enough to leave long-lasting traces that even Blood Weave wasn't able to remove fast.

Mordret remained silent before speaking again, as he usually did. When his voice appeared, it was full of genuine surprise:

"You really found the rift in the ocean of flames?"

Sunny shrugged.

"As it turned out, I was more or less falling toward it the whole time. But even then, I almost burned to death trying to reach it. My most powerful Memories were heavily damaged, and I only survived thanks to a bit of luck."

Which was technically true, although not nearly all of the truth.

The mysterious prince hesitated, then asked:

"...Where are you now?"

Sunny tilted his head.

'How much of my surroundings can he perceive, I wonder?'

The first thing that Mordret had ever said to him was ask why it was so dark, so he probably could see something, at least.

"Can't you see where I am?"

The voice answered, most likely honestly:

"I can see a big hall filled with ancient, broken things. That doesn't tell me a lot, though."

'Makes sense...'

Sunny nodded, feeling the pressure of the Flaw building up in his soul, demanding for him to deliver an answer.

He gestured at the interior of the Obsidian Tower.

"Well... beyond the false stars, the void continues for who knows how much further down. But some distance from the flames, there is actually a single island floating in the emptiness. There is a magnificent black pagoda on that island, which looks like the exact copy of the Ivory Tower. That is where I am right now, inside that pagoda."

Then, Sunny scratched the back of his head, and added:

"But anyway, how come I can still hear you? Haven't you told me that your voice would not reach beyond the stars?"

Mordret sighed.

"That was what I thought. Luckily, I seem to have been wrong."

After a short pause, he said in a strange tone:

"The Ebony Tower... so it does exist."

Sunny blinked.

'I guess it's one way to call it'

Then, however, a complicated expression appeared on his face:

"Wait... you knew about it?"

The mysterious prince remained silent for a bit, then answered:

"That is what I had been trying to find before... before I couldn't search anymore. There were some hints that a duplicate of the Ivory Tower exists somewhere in the Sky Below. I hoped to reach it."

Sunny chose his next words cautiously:

"Oh, really? What else do you know about that place?"

Mordret thought for a few moments, then answered wistfully:

"It is said that a very powerful being came to this shattered land after it had been destroyed by the Lord of Light. Back then, the Sky Below was not as boundless, and there were much more fragments of divine flame still burning in its empty darkness. That being... wanted to harvest those flames."

Suddenly, a lot of small details about the dark island and the Obsidian Tower became much clearer. Sunny already had suspicions about the true purpose of this place, but now, they were confirmed. The ruined machines outside the pagoda, the blackened worktable, the massive glass vessels covered with soot from the inside, the silver brazier...

The Prince of the Underworld had not truly lived in the magnificent pagoda. It was not his home, just a station he had built in the ocean of flame — which had been much larger back then — to harvest some of the divine fire. Why he had need of it, Sunny did not know.

But he suspected that the prideful demon had either succeeded in his purpose or failed, and that was why he eventually left and sealed the Obsidian Tower, which then stood abandoned for thousands of years.

...And at some point during that time, another child of the -unknown- had come here for a short while, although their purpose was very different.

This revelation came and went. There was a question burning in his mind that had nothing to do with such distant past, instead.

It was much more pressing.

Sunny swallowed another piece of meat and asked casually:

"Harvest divine flames? Very interesting. Was that why you wanted to come here, too?"

Or had Mordret been after something else?

...Was after something else?

The lost prince laughed.

"No, not really. In fact, I wasn't that interested in the Obsidian Tower itself, to begin with."

Sunny frowned:

"Why did you want to find it if you weren't interested in it?"

Mordret sighed.

After a long pause, he answered, his voice dark and full of suppressed emotion:

"What I was interested in was not the copy, but the original. The Ivory Tower. The two are supposed to be connected somehow. If one finds that connection... they might just be able to reach past the Crushing and step foot on the heavenly isle..."

Chapter 453: Shrine of Stars

Sunny remained silent for a while, thinking feverishly.

A bridge between the two towers...

That was his chance to escape this dismal place and return to the real world!

...The problem was, he had no clue what this connection Mordret had told him about was. However, he had an idea.

In the past several days, Sunny had explored the rest of the Obsidian... of the Ebony Tower. He had made a couple of fascinating discoveries, but most of it was now full of nothing except dust and rubble. Pretty much everything inside the pagoda disintegrated due to the onslaught of time after he had opened its gates.

The most promising and mysterious of his finds, though, was situated on the last level of the tower, in a small circular hall that housed nothing except for a graceful stone arch, which stood lonesomely in its center and looked like a misplaced, empty doorframe.

The most intriguing part about the arch was that it was surrounded by a circle of runes... almost like the Gateway in the Crimson Spire had been.

In fact, that was what Sunny assumed it to be — an inactive Gateway. For that reason, he had spent these days trying to find a way to activate it. He had poured shadow essence into the arch itself, as well as every corner of the hall. He had studied the unfamiliar runes, hoping to either find a way to translate them or maybe discover a place where they had been damaged, thus rendering the arch useless.

But nothing had worked... yet.

The information provided by Mordret instantly changed his perception of the arch, though. If what the lost prince had told him was true, then maybe

it wasn't a Gateway to the real world. Maybe it was an entrance to the magical bridge connecting the Ebony Tower to its Ivory counterpart.

Still... how was he supposed to make the damn thing work?

With a deep scowl appeared on his face, Sunny asked:

"If this place is really connected to the Ivory Tower... then how would one go about using that connection? Do you have any ideas? There is something that looks like a portal here, but it doesn't work. I tried to open it a hundred times, to no avail."

Mordret thought for a bit, then said uncertainly:

"Have you tried saturating it with essence?"

Sunny grimaced.

"Of course! What am I, a fool? That was the first thing I attempted."

He hesitate for a few moments, then voiced something that had been keeping him worried for a while:

"Maybe... maybe it requires some sort of a key to be opened?"

The voice remained silent for a long time. Then, Mordret said:

"No, I don't think so."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Really? Why?"

The lost prince answered casually:

"Because only doors that can be kicked open require locks and keys. The master of this place wasn't someone who needed such things to keep uninvited guests away."

'Huh... makes sense, I guess. He seems to know a lot about the Prince of the Underworld, though. I thought knowledge of daemons was really scarce...'

Sunny sighed.

"So, how do I activate the connection then?"

Mordret considered the question for a second or two, then said with a hint of doubt in his voice:

"The creator of the Ebony Tower was a builder of things. A genius artifex, but also of practical sort... from what little knowledge of him remains. He would have probably used whatever was at hand, and went for the simplest solution. Builders don't like overcomplicated things, after all."

Sunny considered his words.

'The simplest solution...'

A seed of an idea appeared in his mind.

With a thoughtful expression, he took another bite out of the piece of meat and chewed it thoroughly.

The lost prince politely remained silent while Sunny ate. After a while, however, he suddenly spoke:

"Oh, by the way. I don't want to worry you, Sunless... but there seems to be a powerful Nightmare Creature standing right behind you..."

Sunny almost choked again. If not for the fact that he was looking both forward and back at the same time with the help of the shadows, he would have jumped and summoned the Cruel Sight immediately. But he knew that there was no one behind him. Except for Saint...

He swallowed the foul meat, then smiled weakly.

"Curses, you almost gave me a heart attack! That's... that's not a Nightmare Creature. Can't you differentiate a real demon from an Echo?"

Mordret remained silent for a bit, then said with amusement:

"She is your Echo? Fascinating..."

Sunny frowned:

"What's so fascinating about it?"

However, there was no answer. The mysterious prince was gone once again, disappearing as suddenly as he had appeared. Usually, Sunny was irritated by this annoying habit of his, but this time...

...This time, he was glad.

Sunny couldn't wait to go back to the sixth level, but didn't want Mordret to see what he had found on the level before.

He still didn't trust the lost prince... even though Mordret had been nothing but helpful up until now. Extremely so, in fact. Sunny didn't know if he would have even been alive without his guidance.

'Later... if I manage to return to the Sanctuary in one piece, I'll start trusting him then. A little. Maybe...'

Finishing up his meal — the last he was going to have in a while — Sunny stood up, stretched, and headed toward the stairs.

After he had received the Bone Weave and rested, Sunny explored the rest of the third level of the Ebony Tower. However, he had not found anything of note there. He also had not discovered any more traces left behind by Weaver, which disappointed him a great deal.

The fourth level, however... was much more interesting.

The central hall of it was fashioned into a vast, somber shrine. At the center of it stood an altar cut from a single slab of black onyx, and behind it was an incredibly beautiful statue of a young woman dressed in a flowing tunic, her face obscured by a veil. The young woman was holding a star in one hand, and a bolt of lightning in the other.

...Sunny was pretty sure that she was none other than Storm God, also known as the Goddess of Black Skies. Deity of the oceans, of the depths, darkness, stars, travel, guidance, and disaster.

Which was really interesting.

Why would the Prince of the Underworld build a shrine to his sworn enemy at the very heart of the Ebony Tower?

Their relationship, it seemed, was not as simple as Sunny had thought.

He had been much more interested in the altar itself, though. After finding the shrine, Sunny had tried to place magical coins on the onyx surface, and even spilled a bit of his blood on it.

But this time, the gods had not answered. The coins, too, simply remained laying on the altar instead of turning into shadow essence.

It seemed that the altar was not mystical at all. In fact, as far as altars went, this one appeared to be quite mundane. Sunny had quickly lost interest and continued exploring the great pagoda.

And he had not been disappointed by that decision.

Because there was something very, very important on the fifth level of the Ebony Tower...

Chapter 454: Hope | Shadow Slave

The fifth level of the Ebony Tower had almost killed Sunny.

It was completely empty, its black walls drowning in darkness and unadorned. There was no dust, no ruined pieces of furniture, tools, or strange metal devices. Not even lanterns.

There were, however, countless runes carved into the walls themselves. And almost all of those runes were of the kind that radiated a sickening, dire sensation that made one feel as though their mind was breaking apart.

The same mysterious runes that the Spell used to describe the Unknown, and that Sunny had seen written on the floor by the prisoner of the small cell that was hidden under the ruined cathedral in the Dark City.

Back then, looking at them dealt a heavy blow to Sunny, but he persisted and was eventually able to read a single phrase that the prisoner had written, unlike everything else, in a familiar script...

Hail Weaver, Demon of Fate. Firstborn of the -unknown-...

On the second to last level of the Ebony Tower, however, there were much more of the terrible runes. And most of the seemed far more intense, far more... powerful.

When Sunny had first set foot into the dark hall, he yelped and jumped back, then rolled down the spiraling stairs all the way back to the shrine of the Storm God.

...Good thing his bones were now much more hardy.

Eventually, however, he had returned to the hall of runes.

Sunny knew that looking at the vile writings could destroy his sanity, maybe even outright kill him, so he had done so with his eyes closed and

while leaving the shadows behind, so that they, too, could not see the ancient walls.

Even then, he felt a terrible pressure constantly assaulting his mind.

He was not going to leave without learning at least something from this chamber of secrets.

Where else would he ever be able to study writing left behind by an actual daemon?

So, he tried to limit the scope of what he saw and glance at the obsidian walls, one little section at a time.

The experience was nothing short of horrid, but at least tolerable.

...And only when Sunny summoned Weaver's Mask was he able to look at the portions of the hall without feeling like passing out or falling down in a fit of convulsions.

The forbidden runes turned less dreadful, but did not give up their secrets. He didn't know their language, after all. The Spell, too, either refused or failed to translate them.

His exploration, however, was not for naught. Because, while slowly moving around the dark hall, he discovered something extremely valuable.

It was... a map.

Or rather, a strange semblance of one.

Both the runes and the images constituting the map were cut into the stone, their lines smooth and deep. Sunny did not know what tool the Prince of the Underworld had wielded to leave these markings behind, but imagined him simply using his nail to cut into the indestructible stone that even divine fire couldn't destroy.

At the center of the map, jagged mountains were depicted, shrouded by mist. Directly south of them, an island with a familiar silhouette of a

graceful pagoda floated above flames. Even further south, separated from the mountains by a vast emptiness, was a mighty castle.

Far to the west, a snowy peak stood near a fuming volcano, and nestled between them was an arched bridge. To the south-west, a strange ship floated on ghostly waves. South-east of the mountains, divided from them by a long stretch of nothingness, a perfectly symmetrical pyramid was cut into the obsidian wall.

And lastly, to the north, further away than any other image, above all of them, was... a familiar shape. A fearsome mask stared at Sunny, crowned with three horns.

...Weaver's Mask.

The map was strange, however, because the areas she depicted seemed... disconnected, somehow. There were no borders, no terrain, no measure of distance between them. The ideas of north, south, east, and west were only something Sunny had assigned to the map out of habit. Truly, it could have been the exact opposite, or impossible to apply to the logic of the map altogether.

But at the same time, it fit with the geography of the Dream Realm as he knew it, somewhat.

Each of the images had an inscription near them, written in a runic language that Sunny had trouble understanding. It was similar to the one used by the Spell, but also different enough to make translation either impossible or difficult.

But even without reading the inscriptions, he easily guessed what the images meant.

The mountains depicted in the center of the map were, of course, the Hollow Mountains. Even if the image itself was only familiar, their closeness to the Ivory Tower cemented that conclusion. The Ivory tower, of course, represented the Chained Isles.

The castle to the south had to be Bastion. Although Sunny had never seen it with his own two eyes, he knew its silhouette and appearance from childhood, just like any other human in the real world. Its likeness was the stage for countless dramas, movies, and webtoons, after all. Similarly, he recognized the great stone bridge nestled between a snowy peak and a raging volcano — it was the road to Ravenheart, the great Citadel ruled by clan Song.

Knowing the position of Bastion and Ravenheart, it wasn't hard to surmise that the ship sailing on the ghostly waves represented the Stormsea, where the citadel of the third great clan, House of Night, was located.

Sunny had no idea what the pyramid to the east represented. The seventh image, however, was rather clear... it meant Weaver. By knowing who it described, he was also able to translate the inscription near the depiction of the mask...

It read:

"Fate."

There was another symbol near it, though, which meant something akin to a question mark, an inquiry. So, actually, it was "Fate?". Basically, even the Prince of the Underworld had no idea where his eldest sibling lived.

...And this was what the images were, in Sunny's mind. They represented the seven daemons, or rather, their domains.

Which was nothing short of tantalizing in and of itself, but also meant several things.

Firstly, that the three great clans had inherited their Citadels from three daemons... or at least built their strongholds in the regions of the Dream Realm where daemons had once dwelt.

Secondly, that the Underworld, most likely, was situated beneath the Hollow Mountains. This Death Zone was the very dark and cavernous

domain to which the Prince of the Underworld had retreated after his conflict with the Goddess of the Black Skies.

And lastly... that the ruler of the beautiful and prosperous land that had invoked the wrath of Sun God and doomed their kingdom to destruction — and eventual transformation into the Chained Isles — was a daemon, as well.

Coincidentally, the inscription cut into the stone near the image of the Ivory Tower was the only one after that of Weaver's that Sunny was able to translate, since the runes closely resembled those usually used by the Spell.

It was "Desire".

The other meaning of the runes, however, was... hope.

The Ivory Tower had once belonged... to the Demon of Hope.

Chapter 455: Doorway to Heaven

That revelation had given Sunny a lot to think about.

The Demon of Hope... or Desire. A daemon whose power was most likely tied to souls and mind. What act could such a being have committed to cause Sun God to destroy their whole domain?

And what had happened to that being after?

Just as usual, there were no answers.

Sunny was slowly learning more and more, though. For now, the pieces of information he had earned were scattered and disconnected. But if he continued to slowly accumulate knowledge, one day, they were going to start clicking together. And then... what terrible and wondrous truths would he uncover?

Enough to make up for a lifetime of lies, perhaps.

...Apart from inscriptions dedicated to Weaver and the Ivory Tower, Sunny failed to translate anything else. He had, however, memorized every little detail of the unfamiliar runes describing the Hollow Mountains, Bastion, Ravenhear, a ship sailing on the Stormsea, and the mysterious pyramid to the east.

'I'll have to visit Teacher Julius when I'm back in the real world. He has to know something about this script, right?'

Thinking about the map, Sunny entered the rune hall, kept his eyes closed, and walked to the entrance to the stairwell leading to the sixth level of the Ebony Tower.

The last one.

When he entered the chamber of the stone arch, he sighed with relief. The pressure emanated by the terrifying runes was finally gone, leaving his

mind at ease... the headache caused by them, however, was going to persist for a few more minutes.

Sunny sat down, leaned his back against the wall, and stared at the arch while waiting to fully recover.

The highest level of the great pagoda was not very large, in comparison to the six others. It was just one big hall, circular in shape, and almost completely empty. The only thing inside of it was the arch itself.

It was tall and composed of the same material as the rest of the Ebony Tower. In fact, the arch didn't seem to have been built... instead, it was almost as if it had simply grown out of the floor, without any seam separating it from the black stone. It looked like a doorway that someone had put in the middle of the chamber, for some reason, and then forgot to attach a door to it.

This was Sunny's only hope of escape.

He stared at it for a long time, thinking about how to make the portal work.

In the past, he had tried a lot of things to activate the arch, as well as studying the circle of runes surrounding it. But nothing he had done accomplished anything.

His recent conversation with Mordred, however, had given Sunny an idea.

What had Mordred said? That the Prince of the Underworld was somewhat of a divine smith. A builder of things... but also of the practical sort. That he would have used whatever was at hand, going for the simplest solution.

That more or less confirmed what Sunny knew of the prideful daemon already. After all, Saint and her kin had been created by the Prince of the Underworld. In retrospect, Sunny had completely failed to understand the magnitude of that accomplishment.

To create a living being from nothing... a whole race of them, really. That did sound like something that only a god would be able to do, didn't it?

The Prince of the Underworld, however, was not a god. He was a daemon, a lesser deity. Was the creation of Saint and her people his way of showing the true divinities that he was in no way inferior to them? Or was he guided by some different ambition?

'I wonder how the gods reacted...'

Teacher Julius had described daemons as terrible beings that inspired fear because of their unknown origins and strange powers. What happened after one of them had accomplished something that was supposed to be in the purview of only the gods? Saint's description, back when she was an Echo, said that she and her kin were designed to bring peace, but were born into an endless war instead...

'Huh.' New novel chapters are published on [Libread.com](https://www.libread.com).

But regardless, that was not the point. The point was that Saint was made out of stone. Sunny had always thought that it was an integral part of her design, a fundamental aspect of the vision her creator had for the living statues. To make them stronger, perhaps, or harder to destroy.

But after witnessing the porcelain dolls and speaking with Mordret, Sunny was not so sure anymore. The broken dolls showed that the material from which to make his creations had not mattered to the Prince of the Underworld too much.

'What was at hand... the simplest solution...'

Was Saint made out of stone... simply because there was a lot of stone in the Hollow Mountains for the Prince to use in his experiments? There was nothing but stone there, really.

'That, uh... can't be right, can it?'

But somehow, Sunny felt that it was, indeed, right.

He glanced at Saint and blinked a couple of times.

'...Lazy bastard!'

Sunny shivered, half-expecting to be struck down for thinking about the mighty daemon in such unflattering terms. When nothing happened, he shook his head and returned to his thoughts.

There was plenty of stone in the Hollow Mountains, but there was literally nothing around the Ebony Tower. But what about in the past? What had there been a lot of around it back at the time the Prince of the Underworld resided in the Sky Below? What would he have used to power his magical engines?

This pagoda had been built to harvest divine flames, after all.

Feeling the headache finally retreat, Sunny stood up and walked over to the arch. Then, he summoned the Cruel Sight, activated the [Dark Mirror] enchantment, and poured his essence into it, watching the silver blade become infused with incandescent white light.

Then, he hesitated for a moment, and lightly pressed the tip of the somber spear against the cold black stone.

...Immediately, it was as though the floodgates had been open in his soul. The shadow essence flowed into the Cruel Sight, and through it, the divine flame flowed into the arch.

Sunny staggered.

In just a few seconds, all of his essence was spent.

However... the portal did not open.

Something in the hall did change, though.

The circle of runes surrounding the obsidian arch began to glow with weak, shimmering light. That light was dim and barely visible, but it was, without a doubt, there.

Sunny stared at the runes for a long time, and then, a wide grin appeared on his face.

"...Bingo!"

Chapter 456: Leaving Nothing Behind

For the next few days, Sunny's life became rather monotonous. He would meditate while circulating the shadow essence through the coils of the Soul Serpent to enhance the speed of its recovery, pour it into the obsidian arch... and repeat the process.

With each cycle, the runes surrounding the portal became brighter and brighter. The portal was slowly coming to life, feeling Sunny with hope so intense that he struggled to contain it. He had no doubt that he would be able to activate the arch.

And then... he would go to the Ivory Tower, find a way to descend back to the Chained Isles, somehow, and return to the real world.

And by a new refrigerator.

'And stock it with all kinds of food!'

Sitting on the stone floor of the highest level of the Ebony Tower, Sunny looked at the Covetous Coffers, which stood nearby, with a resentful expression. He knew full well that there was no meat left there, or any other kind of food.

Who knew he would miss the vile flesh of the Mordant Mimic one day?

'I guess one should never say never...'

Sunny was close to fully replenishing the shadow essence, so his thoughts began to wander.

Out of boredom, he dove into the Soul Sea, stared at the shadows for some time, then paced around, then summoned some of his Memories and read their descriptions for the hundredth time, then stared at the looming black suns of his Shadow Cores, then paced some more, then summoned a few other Memories.

'Boring... so boring...'

After a while, something finally attracted his attention.

The runes of Weaver's Mask... had apparently changed a little.

Before, there was a [???] in place of the name of its third enchantment. After Sunny had activated that enchantment... almost frying his brain in the process... the name changed, however.

He blinked a few times, then looked at the runes again.

'Did I... did I read it right?'

But no, there was no mistake. The first two enchantments were just as before, [Mantle of Lies] and [Simple Trick]. The third one, however, now had new runes describing it...

Memory Enchantment: [Where is my eye?].

[Where is my eye?] Enchantment Description: "Helps the wielder peer into the tapestry of Fate."

Sunny looked at the runes with a deadpan expression for a few moments, and then laughed so hard that it threw him out of the Soul Sea.

"Oh... oh gods... where is my eye! Priceless!"

By the time he was done laughing at Weaver's strange naming sensibility, the cycle of restoring the shadow essence was complete.

Sunny shook his head, smiled, then stood up and summoned the Cruel Sight.

By now, the circle of runes was burning with a furious white radiance, turning the somber black hall into a stark tapestry of darkness and light. It seemed as if the air inside the arch was rippling slightly, hazy from heat.

He walked toward the obsidian arch and, without wasting any time, touched it with the tip of the silver spear. Once again, his soul essence was devoured at terrible speed.

This time, however, only half of it was consumed.

As bright light suddenly hit Sunny in the eyes, he took an involuntary step back and raised a hand to shield them. A cool breeze caressed his face, and he could suddenly smell... bark, grass, soil.

Life.

When his eyes adjusted to the brightness, Sunny slowly lowered his hand and looked at the arch with a bewildered expression.

It was as though a rift in reality appeared inside the Ebony Tower.

All around the portal, the hall was just as it had been — dark, somber, cut from lusterless black stone.

...Inside the portal, however, was a clear blue sky. Sunlight had suddenly invaded the Ebony Tower after thousands of years spent in utter darkness, and brought with it the sounds of the wind and the rustling of leaves.

Sunny could see the skies, but also the ground. A beautiful green meadow continued from where the obsidian floor ended, full of vibrancy and life. A shadow of a tall tree shaded the proximity of the portal, and there was a path of white stone leading from it toward...

Some distance away, a pristine white wall rose higher than Sunny could see through the portal. Surrounded by the blue skies, clouds, and vibrant green grass, it seemed to be the epitome of beauty and tranquility.

The whole sight was like a paradise.

He swallowed.

'The... the Ivory Tower. Mordret was right!'

What's more, judging by how softly the grass swayed under the wind and how lazily the branches of the tree moved, the heavenly island was really... it was really not affected by the Crushing.

In that regard, at least, it was safe.

'Yes!'

Suddenly tense, Sunny quickly glanced at the circle of runes. Just as he had expected, it was already growing dimmer. The portal was burning through the meager amount of divine flame Sunny had been able to charge it within these past days, and was going to close soon.

"Curses!"

Well... it was not as though he had not been prepared to go through the arch as soon as it opened. He had done everything he wanted to do in the Ebony Tower, given the circumstances. There was not much to be done here, to begin with. Time had destroyed every possible trophy he could have found, and the most valuable treasures — the Bone Weave and the knowledge of the map left behind by the Prince of the Underworld — were already in his possession.

Now, he just had to escape alive.

Dismissing all of his Memories, Sunny wrapped both shadows around his body... and dashed toward the light.

'Please, please don't be an illusion!'

He appeared near the portal, dove inside... and stumbled, falling to his knees.

His fingers touched the soft grass, and, with his tactile sense enhanced by the Bone Weave, Sunny felt every tiny detail of its texture, of the rich soil beneath, of the heat of the sun on his skin.

It was all real.

It was wonderful!

As the portal shimmered and closed behind him, Sunny closed his eyes tightly and let out a short, quiet cry. He had too many emotions boiling in his heart to put them into words.

He made it. He escaped from the void.

He left nothing behind...

While Sunny was feeling the joy of escaping from the Sky Below, something else happened.

Somewhere far away, or maybe close by, there was a room built of cold stone, full of deafening silence. It was dark and empty, arranged in the shape of a heptagon, with seven corners drowning in deep shadows.

There were seven mirrors standing at each of the seven walls of the room, pointed at its center.

There was nothing there.

...However, in each of the seven mirrors, a figure of a young man reflected, sitting on the stone floor with his hands chained behind his back.

The young man was still and motionless, almost as if he was just a statue and not a living being.

But then, something changed.

A few moments after Sunny crossed the portal and appeared on the isle of the Ivory Tower...

One corner of the young man's lips curled upward slightly, forming a hint of a smile.

Mordret was glad to see Sunny escape, too.

Chapter 457: Ivory Tower | Shadow Slave

"Saint... come look at this..."

Sunny sat on the soft grass, enjoying the sunlight and the cool wind. He had not even known how much he missed them... missed everything, really. Looking back, it was hard to imagine that he had endured more than a month of utter nothingness without losing his mind. His experiences in the Dark City, it seemed, made him far more resilient.

...The shadow of the Ivory Tower was slowly moving closer as the evening approached, marking the passage of time. It was peaceful and quiet on the green meadow of the heavenly island.

Answering his call, the taciturn demon appeared nearby and stood silently, observing the magnificent white tower. Her ruby eyes, however, did not show any emotion.

He sighed.

"...Well, I think it's lovely."

The soaring island was not very large, so Sunny could more or less see its edge not too far away, surrounded by floating slates of shattered marble. There was a meadow on this side of it, a grove that rustles under the wind, and a graceful gazebo built of the same white material as the Ivory Tower itself. The stone arch inside of it was also white, and empty. The portal was gone.

Some distance away, connected to the gazebo by a stone path, stood the magnificent great pagoda that had once belonged to the Demon of Hope. If its copy in the Sky Below was somber and ominous, the original was the complete opposite. It was beautiful, graceful, and slightly surreal, as if too sublime to exist in the mortal realm.

...In a sense, it did not.

Something about the Ivory Tower made Sunny uneasy, however. He couldn't quite describe the feeling, but it was as though he simultaneously felt pulled toward it and threatened by it. The sensation did not come from his intuition, but more so from the deepest corners of his soul. It was rather strong.

And there was also something strange in the shape of the tower itself.

There was a weird thing that went around the base of it, circling the whole perimeter of the great pagoda and disappearing from view. That thing was almost of the same color, but slightly less pristine, and made out of long and weathered sections.

After looking at it for a while, Sunny finally realized what the thing was.

...Bone. Wrapped around the tower was what remained of the tail of some giant, dead creature. He frowned.

'...Good thing it's dead. I hope it remains this way.'

Sunny sighed, used the Cruel Sight to help himself stand up, and headed toward the edge of the island. Saint followed, putting the blade of the Midnight Shard on her shoulder.

Reaching it, he cautiously looked down and saw the disjointed patchwork of the Chained Isles far below. From this high, they looked like pieces of a beautiful mosaic that someone had laid out on the backdrop of velvety darkness, with a scattering of radiant stars shining in between.

Sunny gazed down for a while, then picked up a rock from the ground and threw it over the edge.

The rock fell for a hundred meters or so without meeting any resistance. Then, however, it suddenly cracked and exploded into shards, which then became dust and were scattered in the wind.

'...Curses.'

It seemed that the Crushing was still there. It's just that the Ivory Tower itself was not affected by it, as well as the island it stood upon and a small area surrounding it.

How was he going to come down?

Sunny stood at the edge for some time with a resentful expression on his face, then turned around and walked deeper into the island, circling the Ivory Tower from the left.

On the other side of the great pagoda was a clear lake, with streams of water flowing out of it and falling over the edge of the island. In the bright sunlight, it seemed as though the entire surface of the lake was shining with pure golden radiance. Sunny looked at his reflection in the water, then at an intricately engraved bench standing near it, cut from white stone.

Finally, he walked further on and reached a vantage point from which the gate of the graceful tower could be seen.

'Oh...'

The gates looked very similar to those he had opened in the depths of the Sky Below, with the main difference being the color and the absence of soot.

...As well as that there were skeletal remains of a giant beast lying in front of them, its serpentine body wrapped around the tower, its massive skull resting right near the tall white doors. Each of the terrifying fangs of the great beast was as long as Sunny was tall, at least. Deep darkness nestled in its empty eyes.

He shivered.

'Is that... a dragon?'

Indeed, it was. Right in front of Sunny were the weathered, snow-white bones of an actual dragon. The image of the mighty creature laying dead in front of the pristine tower was solemn, mysterious, and terrifying.

What could have killed such a being?

Thinking that he didn't wish to know, Sunny lingered for a while, then headed toward the remains of the dragon. He was desperately hoping that the great beast would not stir and come to life. If that happened... well. It was better to not even think about it.

Reaching the white skull of the mighty creature, Sunny hesitated for a bit, then walked between the terrifying fangs and approached the gates.

...They were slightly ajar, so he didn't even need to use essence to unlock them.

Sunny gathered his courage, raised his hand... and pushed the gates open.

Suddenly, he felt a bit sleepy.

'What... what is this?'

Shaking his head to chase the sleepiness away, Sunny walked inside the tower and found himself in a great hall, bright light streaming through its tall windows. The air inside, however, was infused with a strange, shimmering darkness.

And in its center, there were...

Chains.

Seven chains sprawled from the pristine white floor, as if growing out of it, each ending in a broken shackle. The shackles were inscribed with a myriad of runes and marred, their metal torn. They were also the source of the strange shimmering, which rose from their surface in ethereal wisps.

A chaotic, everchanging mass of pure darkness pulsed in the very center of the great hall. No, it was not darkness... rather, it seemed like a rift in the fabric of reality, one that could devour even light itself.

Sunny tensed, then took a tentative step forward, hoping to see what was hidden behind the darkness.

As soon as he did so, however, a familiar voice echoed in the silence of the great hall:

"Stop, Sunless! Turn back if you wish to live."

Chapter 458: Shackles of Hope

Sunny froze, then took a careful step back and stared at the walls of the great hall.

Mordret's timing, this time around, was impeccable.

It was not like Sunny had planned to get too close to the mass of darkness, but he might have underestimated the danger it presented. To be honest, he felt that he wasn't thinking entirely straight... it was not like he had lost control, but the strange pull he felt outside the tower was much stronger here, exerting a subtle effect on his mind.

Sunny tensed and glanced at the pulsating dark rift, then realized that the pull emanated from the shackles that were the source of it.

"...Why? What is that thing?"

The lost prince remained silent for a few moments, then sighed.

"I really can't make sense of you."

Sunny blinked.

That was not the answer he had expected!

"What? What is that supposed to mean?"

Mordret answered with a bit of doubt in his voice.

"Nothing, really. It's just that... some things about you suggest a certain background, but then there are as many contradictions. Don't you know what a Seed of Nightmare looks like?"

Sunny jumped back, then cautiously looked at the mass of shimmering darkness again.

So... that was a Seed of Nightmare. A vile manifestation of the Spell that grew in the Dream Realm and eventually blossomed, opening a Gate to the real world for the Nightmare Creatures to enter. The thing that Awakened were supposed to seek out and destroy by challenging the Nightmare contained within.

No wonder it exerted a pull on him.

He scowled, then said with annoyance:

"How am I supposed to know what a Seed of Nightmare looks like? I only became an Awakened a few months ago!"

Mordret spoke in his usual polite tone:

"Have your clan elders not taught you anything?"

Sunny opened his eyes wide, a shocked expression appearing on his face.

"Clan? What clan?! Do I look like a Legacy to you?!"

The lost prince did not answer, letting Sunny boil with outrage in silence. Eventually, he slowly exhaled and asked dejectedly:

"Anyway... are you sure that that's what it is?"

Mordret lingered for a long time, then said quietly:

"I am. I searched for it for a long time, after all."

Hearing these words, Sunny frowned.

'...What?'

"Wait... is that why you were trying to reach the Ivory Tower? To challenge a Nightmare?"

He rubbed his face in frustration, trying to find a way to make sense of that statement, then shook his head:

"Why the hell would you do that? There's no shortage of Seeds of Nightmare everywhere in the Dream Realm, ones that are not hidden behind endless voids and oceans of divine flame!"

These things were not so numerous that one stumbled on one every day, but also not so rare to go to this lengths to reach one. What had Mordret been thinking?

The lost prince answered after a short pause, his voice slightly amused:

"...You are not a Legacy, indeed."

Sunny let out a heavy sigh.

"Either you are extra obscure today, or I can't understand you for some reason. What do Legacies have to do with any of this?"

Mordred thought for a bit, then said:

"This Seed of Nightmare... is a very, very special one."

'What is he going on about?'

The only thing that differentiated Seeds, in Sunny's mind, was their Category. A Category Two Seed would blossom into a Category Two Gate, and contained a Second Nightmare. If an Awakened challenged it and passed the trial, they would become a Master. If a Master challenged a Category Three Seed and survived the Third Nightmare, they would become a Saint.

The same thing went for Sovereigns, although there only had been three Fourth Nightmares conquered in all of human history, as far as Sunny knew... and he knew more than most people.

How could a Seed be special?

As if guessing what he was thinking about, Mordret spoke:

"There are a lot of Master, but not all Masters are equal. There are a few dozen Saints, but not all Saints are equal. And similarly, there are numerous Nightmares... but not all Nightmares are equal."

Sunny scowled.

"How so? Is it easier? More difficult?"

The lost prince sighed.

"Neither. As far as the difficulty of the trial is concerned, the Spell is always fair... in its own perverse way. However, that doesn't mean that the outcome is always the same. What enemies you vanquish determine what Memories and Echoes you receive. What battles you fight determines what experience you will bring back."

Sunny thought back on his own arsenal of Memories, and had to admit that the more unique Nightmare Creatures he had thought, the greater the reward was. In that sense, challenging a... "unique" Nightmare would certainly pose more risk, but also promise a greater boon.

Add the existence of the Lineage Memories into the equation...

A deep frown appeared on his face.

Mordret, however, was not done talking.

"...But more than that, the nature of the Nightmare you challenge determines what knowledge you will receive, and what secret you will be able to glean. As a researcher, you should know that the lessons humans can learn from the decrepit ruins in the Dream Realm are not that profound. Where do you think most of our knowledge comes from? It comes from the stories people bring back from their Nightmares, of course."

That... made sense. There were actual natives of the Dream Realm out and about in the Nightmares, after all. Like Auro of the Nine.

Even if he was really just an illusion, an illusion created by the Spell was no simple thing.

Most of the knowledge Sunny possessed was built on the foundation of what he had learned from the noble swordsman and Scholar. How much more would he know if he had gone into the Nightmare with the intention to not only survive, but also learn?

Sunny glanced at the dark Seed.

It had grown in the tower that had once belonged to one of the seven daemons. What mysteries would such a Nightmare reveal?

Mordret gave him time to think, then said in an even tone:

"For that reason, Legacy clans — not all of them, but the truly powerful ones — select the Nightmares for their members to challenge very carefully."

Sunny lingered for a bit, then raised an eyebrow:

"...What crazy clan chose that cursed Seed for you to try and find, then?"

The lost prince laughed.

"Oh, no! No one had wished for me to seek it. It was my decision alone. In fact, I suspect that only two people in both the waking world and this one know about its existence. Me... and now you."

He chuckled again, and then added:

"But that is what makes it so special, as well. None of them could have learned of its existence, reached it, and taken its rewards as their own."

After that, Mordret suddenly grew silent. He remained that way for a while, and then added quietly:

"Well... it's not like I managed to do it, too."

He sighed, lingered for a few moments, and then added in a wistful tone:

"Can you imagine what secrets that Seed hides? What one would learn from that Nightmare? A Nightmare... a Nightmare that was created from the chains with which Hope herself had been bound..."

Chapter 459: Seed of Nightmare

'Hope... herself...'

Sunny stared at the seven chains, finding new meaning in their cruel visage and the misshapen, torn remnants of the seven rune-inscribed shackles.

So the Sun God's ire had not been quelled by just destroying her kingdom. He had gone a step further, binding the Demon of Hope at the heart of her decimated domain... for how long?

And how had she escaped, in the end?

He tilted his head.

"So the Demon of Hope was chained here?"

Mordret answered with a hint of surprise in his voice:

"...You know of the daemons?"

A crooked smile appeared on Sunny's face.

"I do... a bit. Why wouldn't I? Although truth be told, there's not a lot of information about them, even among the Dream Realm researchers. So... the ruler that you had told me about was one of the daemons? A lesser deity?"

Mordret kept silent for a bit, then said dejectedly:

"Yes. I am not sure that those two words really go together, though. I also don't know what Hope had done to earn the wrath of the Lord of Light. However, I do know that these seven chains are what holding is the Chained Isles from falling into the Sky Below."

Sunny raised his eyebrows.

"What?"

The lost prince sighed.

"People think that there are numerous heavenly chains connecting all the island, but in fact, there are only seven, and you are looking at their roots... or rather, there were only seven. Each of them had to be broken for the Ivory Tower to become untethered, of course. So, now the islands are linked by the fragments of the original seven chains, many of them severed from each other. That is why they are slowly crumbling, one after another."

Sunny thought for a bit, trying to correct the way he used to think about the Chained Isles. The new information was interesting, but not very useful...

Shaking his head, he turned back to the Seed of Nightmare.

"So... what is the category of that thing? I guess it contains a Second Nightmare, since you wanted to challenge it?"

Mordret answered succinctly:

"Correct."

'...That's one way I can get out of the Dream Realm, then... but am I suicidal enough to go into the Second Nightmare alone? Whole cohorts of experienced Awakened routinely perish in their attempts to become Masters. What would my chances of survival be with no one to cover my back?'

Just as Master jet had said, no one survived in the Dream Realm alone. She probably knew from experience.

He scowled.

"Wait... will this Seed create a Gate in the real world if it's not destroyed?"

When Mordret answered, his voice was almost indifferent.

"Indeed. But not for a long time... maybe in a few years, or a decade. It has not matured enough to be able to bloom, yet."

Sunny hesitated.

"But it can be challenged, right?"

The lost prince did not answer for a while, but then finally said:

"Yes. A Seed can be challenged before it blooms, as well as after. If the Seed is not found in time and a Gate opens, challengers can fight their way through and enter the Nightmare directly. The Gate also disrupts the anchors of those near it, so Masters and Saints that enter the Dream Realm will appear in the vicinity of the blooming Seed. After that, they can lead Awakened to it."

He paused, then added:

"In fact, most of the Seeds are not found in time, because the Dream Realm is vast and only partially explored. That's why the Nightmare Creatures are entering our world so often. Challenging a Seed before it blooms is much better. In this case, however... I would advise against it."

Sunny turned away from the mass of shimmering darkness, then asked in an even tone:

"Yeah? Why?"

Mordred let out a heavy sigh.

"Conquering a Second Nightmare alone is not impossible, but attempting it is tantamount to gambling your life away. The chances of returning alive are very slim. That is why Awakened challenge them as members of cohesive, experienced cohorts. Even then, many don't survive... most, even. But this Nightmare is actually far worse. Entering it is a guaranteed death sentence, regardless of how many challengers there are. Unless..."

Sunny kept his ears open, suddenly very attentive.

"Unless what?"

The lost prince remained silent for a short moment, then said:

"There is a black altar in the place you call Night Temple. On it lies an ivory knife. Only those who have shed blood on the altar and received the Memory of the knife have a chance to survive the trial that hides within this Seed."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'Wait... that sounds very familiar!'

He thought for a few seconds, then asked:

"Would the obsidian knife from the white altar of the Sanctuary of Noctis work?"

Mordret laughed.

"Sure. Having both would be even better, incredibly so. However, I don't know the method to receive the Memory of the obsidian knife. The ritual seems to be different from the one required for the altar in the Night Temple, and I have never figured it out."

'You didn't... but I might have.'

The image of the Covetous Coffin appeared in Sunny's mind, full of golden coins. There were almost fifteen hundred of them inside. Would that be enough to allow him to lift the obsidian knife off the altar?

He had a feeling that it would.

"What do these knives actually do, though? And how the hell do you know all this?"

However, there was no response. Mordret was once again gone.

Sunny was left alone in the beautiful hall of the ivory pagoda, staring at its white walls and the darkness that had taken root between them.

The Seed of Nightmare was calling to him, demanding to be challenged... and destroyed. Or maybe simply to be fed a delicious human soul.

'Crazy. This is crazy...'

Challenging a Second Nightmare alone was very similar to throwing his life away, and that was even without the particular piece of information that Mordret had given him — that no one would be able to survive this very special Nightmare without a Memory of one of the two altar knives, or better yet, in possession of both.

The question was... what was worse?

Challenging the Nightmare, or attempting to survive the Crushing?

Chapter 460: Fight or Flight

Sunny remained in the Hall of Chains for a while, looking at the Seed of Nightmare and the shimmering darkness that suffused it.

Then, he walked outside. Full of thought, Sunny passed between the jaws of the dead dragon and slowly headed toward the lake. There, he sat on the stone bench and stared at the water with a dark expression on his face. The wind lightly caressed his face and his pale skin, soothing the few remaining burns that he had received in the Sky Below.

Saint stood silently by his side, her graceful onyx figure reflecting in the clear waters of the lake.

A heavy sigh escaped from his lips.

'...I am almost home.'

More than a month ago, he had ventured on an expedition to explore the Shipwreck Island and search for clues about the whereabouts of the treasure left behind by mysterious Noctis. He had only planned to be gone for a week.

He had found the treasure, but also fought and defeated two devils: one Fallen, and one Ascended, receiving two powerful Memories in the process. After that, he gazed at the tapestry of Fate through the eyes of a divine mask, and plunged into an endless abyss.

He spent several weeks plummeting through a sea of nothingness, only to be met by an ocean of flames in its depths. On the other side of the fire was a black tower built by an ancient demon, and in it was a severed hand of a deity, consumed by a terrible rot. There, Sunny swallowed a phalanx bone of Weaver, and received the second part of their lineage.

After that, he used divine flames to open a portal between the dark void and the sunlit heavens, and found the seven chains that a god had once used to bind Desire, the daemon of Hope.

And somewhere along the way, he met a lost soul who called himself Mordred, the Prince of Nothing... a disembodied voice that came out of nowhere, and helped him along the way.

Now, Sunny just had to do one last thing... either plunge into a deadly Nightmare, or off the edge of the Ivory Island, to be met with the obliterating fury of the Crushing.

With a heavy sigh, he turned around and stared at the white bones of the great beast that had wrapped its mighty body around the base of Hope's beautiful tower once, thousands of years ago, before succumbing to death.

"...Let's get this show on the road, I guess."

Some time later, Sunny was leaning on the wall of the Ivory Tower. He was in a tight spot between the tail of the dead dragon and the white surface of the great pagoda, with Saint standing near him, her weapons dismissed.

With a crooked smile, Sunny wrapped the two shadows around his body and circulated shadow essence through the coils of the Soul Serpent, preparing for what was about to come.

Then, he looked at the taciturn stone demon and raised his eyebrows.

"What are you waiting for? Push!"

Saint gave him an indifferent look, then took a step forward, placed her hand on the surface of the massive bone in front of her, and pushed with all her demonic strength. Her feet sunk into the soil by a few centimeters, but the ancient bone did not move.

...Until Sunny joined his Shadow, that was.

Pressing his shoulder against the adamantite white surface, he poured shadow essence into his muscles, and pushed, too. Although it felt as though the strain was going to kill him, the bone finally gave.

One of the massive vertebrae comprising the dead dragon's tail rolled over, separating from the rest.

"Come on! Keep at it!"

...Of course, Sunny was not going to challenge a Second Nightmare alone. What was he, crazy? Well, maybe he was a little. But being suicidal was not a part of his very mild, borderline charming craziness.

Instead, he was going to throw a piece of the dead dragon's tail off the edge of the Ivory Island and ride it all the way down to the ground, hoping that it would survive the onslaught of the Crushing.

If a dragon couldn't, then what could?

"Put your back into it!"

Saint didn't really need his encouragement... or advice... so Sunny was mostly shouting for his own benefit, since producing loud noises seemed to help him cope with the strain of trying to push the ancient bone, for some reason.

Luckily, now that it had been dislodged, the process became easier.

Together, they slowly moved the massive vertebra past the gazebo containing the inactive portal, then past the grove of ancient trees, and finally to the very edge of the island.

There, Sunny stopped for a moment and tried to catch his breath. Then, he cautiously looked down.

That... was a mistake.

If before the colorful mosaic of the flying islands far below was simply a breathtaking sight, now that he had to actually jump down, it made Sunny dizzy and frightened out of his wits.

"Uh..."

But it was too late to change his mind.

...Wasn't it?

Gritting his teeth, Sunny tried not to think about the inconceivable height and climbed inside the vertebra, which, of course, was hollow at the center. There was just enough space there to fit his body, and that was the reason why he had chosen this particular one, in the first place.

He lingered for a long time, trying to gather his courage.

'Maybe it's not too late... maybe I should just enter the Seed. What's the big deal, anyway? It's... it's just a Second Nightmare.'

But no, there was no way back. He simply had to do it.

Inhaling deeply, Sunny held his breath for a moment, and then screamed in a small voice:

"Saint! Push it over!"

Outside the massive vertebra, the taciturn demon stared at the surface of the ancient bone for a moment.

And then... gave it a devastating kick.

As the tail bone of the dragon plunged off the edge of the Ivory Island, giving Sunny a serious rattle, he yelped, dismissed Saint, and dissolved into the shadow that dwelt in the hollow space inside the vertebra.

Of course, he wasn't going to try and survived the Crushing in his physical form... he just needed a large enough shadow to hide in. As long as the dragon bone endured, the shadow would too, and he would be safe.

...If it endured.

For a couple of seconds, everything seemed fine, but then the vertebra left the bubble of safety surrounding the heavenly island, and suddenly... an

inconceivable pressure struck it from all sides like a hammer of a wrathful god, making the porcelain bone produce terrifying cracking noises.

Once again, Sunny was plummeting with terrible speed through the sky. Only this time, the vehicle he had chosen to transport him was even stranger, as well as spinning like crazy, with the wind roaring deafeningly all around. Luckily, he couldn't get sick as a shadow... otherwise, his already empty stomach would have become emptier.

'Curses! Don't break, you damn bone!'

The vertebra of the dead dragon was cracking and slowly breaking apart... but, miraculously, still holding together.

At this height, the Crushing was deadly enough to pulverize the flesh of a Saint — a bona fide demi-god — into a bloody paste. Maybe even a big, red cloud. But the adamantite dragonbone was only now beginning to slowly crumble apart.

Once the process started, though, it became unstoppable.

Sunny panicked as he watched wide cracks appear on the white surface all around him. Then, a piece of the bone flew away, letting in a chaotic flood of light. Cursing, he shifted away from the breach, but seconds later, another appeared, and then another. The size of the shadow he could hide in was growing smaller and smaller.

'Crap!'

Soon, there were more holes and cracks in the bone than he could count.

And then... it crumbled completely.

At the last second, Sunny slid onto the biggest remaining slab of the ancient vertebra, and then went into a crazy dance, shifting from one side of it to another as the fragment spun and exposed different parts of it to the sunlight.

Small pieces broke off from it, and then, the fragment itself cracked, too.

'Argh!'

Finally, the piece of the adamantine vertebrae disintegrated into a rain of splinters that were too small to fit Sunny into their shadows. With nowhere else to hide, he was thrown out into the physical world, his body instantly becoming the victim of the bone-breaking force of the Crushing.

...Luckily, his bones were now much more robust than before.

And the Crushing was already not as irrevocably obliterating as it had been higher up.

As a loud scream escaped from Sunny's mouth, he continued to fall, feeling his body go through a cruel meatgrinder. But with the help of two shadows and a generous outpour of shadow essence, it wasn't enough to kill him, or even seriously wound him. It was simply painful, damaging, and unpleasant.

The tail bone of the dead dragon had carried him down for long enough to go through the worst layers of the Crushing.

Now, all he had to do was stick the landing.

With a suppressed groan, Sunny struggled to control his fall and finally managed to stabilize his body, preventing it from spinning madly.

The Chained Isles were now much, much closer than they had been before.

In fact, he could even recognize a few nearest ones.

'Don't you dare miss, you pale bastard!'

He really, really didn't want to repeat the whole damned process again.

Summoning the Dark Wing, Sunny waited for a second for the dragonfly cloak to activate its enchantment, and then slowly started to turn his fall into a glide.

A single thought rang in his mind:

'I made it... I actually made it... crap, I really did!'

Some time later, a figure of a young man fell from the skies and nimbly landed on the index finger of the giant iron hand that lay in the center of a peaceful, quiet island. The young man looked a bit strange... he was naked above the waist, with several half-healed burns covering his pale skin, and a menacing, intricate tattoo of a coiling black serpent covering his arms, as well as a large part of his torso.

His black hair was wild and disheveled, and his dark eyes seemed a little crazy.

Sunny swayed a little, caught his balance...

...And turned to a group of Awakened who were sitting around a dancing campfire, staring at him with their mouths wide open.

A bright smile appeared on his face.

"Ah! Good day to you, fellow humans. Say..."

As mad intensity appeared in his eyes, Sunny licked his lips and asked hoarsely:

"...Is that food I see roasting over your fire?"

Chapter 461: Welcome Home | Shadow Slave

The heavy lid of the metal sarcophagus opened, letting out bluish light and wisps of cold mist. Soon, a pale hand emerged from inside.

Jumping out of the sleeping pod, Sunny landed on the floor, felt the ceramic texture of the armored plates beneath his bare feet, and let out a low, satisfied sigh.

'I'm back, finally!'

It was so nice to return to the real world.

After meeting the cohort of the Sanctuary Awakened on the Iron Hand Island, he traveled back to the Citadel with them. Some were curious about where he had been for more than a month, but most weren't even aware that Sunny had gone missing. He used the full scope of his formidable ability to bend the truth ever which way, and left them with the impression that his recent expedition had been long, but not very exciting.

...They did continue to give him strange looks the whole way back, though. For some reason.

But Sunny wasn't too bothered by that.

After entering the Sanctuary, he went straight for the altar. Since it was the middle of the day and the moon was hidden behind the horizon, he couldn't use the coins immediately. So, instead, he simply touched the altar and left the Dream Realm.

'Home, I'm finally home...'

Even though Sunny had not spent a lot of time in his new house, the feeling of safety both its walls and the real world gave him was extremely comforting. Miraculously, even though he had been gone for many weeks, his body felt completely fine. It was as though he had only slept for a night.

"That's the magic of technology!"

Glancing at the extravagantly expensive sleeping pod, Sunny decided that he had spent his money well, and headed for the exit out of the basement while whistling a cheerful tune.

Then, however, he froze.

'What the hell...'

Something was not right.

First of all, he had never used the lighting in the underground dojo. But now, it was turned on, drowning everything with bright light.

Secondly, the armored doors of the lift leading up were violently torn open. It was as though a massive Nightmare Creature had broken through the defense systems of the house and ripped them apart, bending the adamantite alloy like it was wax.

'Crap!'

Sunny jumped back and summoned the Cruel Sight.

What could have come here? Did a Gate open nearby?

Full of tension and grim determination, he used the stairwell to climb to the ground floor and cautiously entered his living room.

The first thing he saw there were...

Dirty... dishes? Lots and lots of dirty dishes...

The second thing he saw were two hazel eyes staring at him with scathing accusation.

'Have I gone really... really crazy?'

Somehow, Effie was in his living room, sitting in her wheelchair with a bowl of steaming cup noodles in one hand and chopsticks in the other. There was a very disgruntled expression on her face.

'What the hell is she doing here? What's going on?'

Staring at Sunny, Effie swallowed a mouthful of noodles, and then said in a dark tone:

"You're back. Way to make your friends worry, asshole..."

As it turned, back when Sunny had been falling into the Sky Below and thinking about how no one would miss him... he was very, very wrong.

In fact, the opposite had happened.

About two weeks after he stopped answering their messages, both Effie and Kai got worried. Effie went to the Academy to check on him, and that was when they learned that Sunny moved out of the dormitory.

"Bastard! You could have told us that you bought yourself a house, you know? You owe me a housewarming party!"=

Sunny blinked.

'A what party? Is there really such a thing or is she pulling my finger?'

Not knowing where to find him, Kai used his connections to learn Sunny's new address. Since he was limited in where he could go without drawing the attention of the press, Effie went instead. And when she found the basement locked... well...

"My... my armored doors! It was you, you broke them!"

She sneered.

"What are you crying about? Those "armored" doors of yours were pathetically easy to break, anyway. Buy yourself better ones! Anyway, I thought that I was going to find your corpse in the sleeping pod. Do you even know how that made me feel?"

A heavy expression appeared on her face.

"That would have been a... a real tragedy..."

Sunny sighed.

'Well. At least she cares.'

"...I mean, just think about it, all those amazing Memories you hoard, gone just like that! If you're going to die, at least give them to me before you do!"

'...Spoke too soon.'

After making sure that his life signs were stable inside the sleeping pod, Effie stayed to keep a watch on him, while both she and Kai tried to find out where Sunny was. Apparently, they went as far as contacting the representatives of the White Feather clan.

"You didn't!"

Sunny grabbed his head, realizing that he had a lot of explaining to do once he was back in the Sanctuary. A cohort of random Awakened was one thing, but if Saint Tyris herself was aware of his disappearance, things were going to get much harder for him.

Effie snorted.

"Of course we did! We also contacted Cassie and her Fire Keepers, since they have a cohort in that remote hellhole you are anchored at. But even she didn't know where the hell you have disappeared to!"

'Curses!'

They even brought Cassie into it...

Sunny groaned.

"But why... why would you do all this?"

Effie gave him a long look, then shook her head dejectedly.

"Doofus... can you stop being such a doofus?"

He stared at her in bewilderment.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

She shook her head again and activated her communicator.

"Ponder on it! And while you're at it, be quiet for a few minutes. I need to call Kai and tell him that you have turned up. Poor guy must have flown halfway to the Chained Isles by now."

Sunny eyes grew wide.

"F—flown... what?!"

Effie gave him a pitying look.

Then, she said:

"...What part of be quiet did you not understand?"

Chapter 462: An Epic Quest

After Effie gave Kai a call and let him know that Sunny was alive and back in the real world, they spent a minute in awkward silence.

Sunny looked around, taking in the sight of his once pristine and orderly living room. Now, there were dirty dishes everywhere, as well as empty packets of take-out food... at least he thought that that was what they were, since he had never actually bought one before.

Effie was such a slob!

There were even several pieces of clothing thrown into a corner!

Speaking of clothing...

'Crap!'

"By the way, Sunny... when did you get this badass tattoo? A big, long snake no less! Makes a girl wonder..."

He sighed heavily, cursing the fact that he had not adjusted the Puppeteer's Shroud after summoning it back in the basement. There were no burns on his skin now, after all.

"...It's not really a tattoo. It's a magical serpent that helps me control and regenerate essence faster. Don't ask why it manifests as a tattoo, because I have no idea, really."

He hesitated for a bit, then asked:

"So you've been just living here for these past few weeks?"

Effie shrugged.

"Sure. Someone had to monitor your vital signs. Plus, my family... well, they deserved a break after taking care of my comatose body for four years,

and everything before that. So I bought a very nice place for us, and then, sort of... moved out."

Then, an animated expression appeared on her face:

"Don't worry, though! The stuff you keep in your bedroom remained a secret. I can't even go up the stairs, remember?"

Sunny stared at her in outrage.

"What stuff?! There's no stuff! I don't even use the bedroom! I can't really sleep, can I?!"

Effie laughed.

"...Right. Makes sense... that you are not doing it on the bed kind of guy. Oh, yeah! What happened to your fridge?"

He glared, then looked away in embarrassment.

"Ah, that... I sort of broke it. By accident."

Then, a sudden smile appeared on his face.

"...Wanna go buy a new one?"

Since Kai wanted to meet, Sunny and Effie decided to visit an elite shopping center in the center of the city, and then wait for him in a posh restaurant nearby. The former huntress also told Sunny that she would hold off on asking questions about his unexpected adventure until all three of them were together, so that he didn't have to repeat everything twice.

Which suited him fine, since he needed time to decide what he wanted to tell his friends, and what would be better kept to himself.

There was so much he needed to think about, and do... the journey into the Sky Below had not only disrupted his plans in the real world, but also added

new things to his agenda. From training to wield a spear better to setting up a shop to sell the soul shards he had brought back with the help of the Covetous Coffers, there were just too many opportunities in front of him.

He also had to decide what to do about Rain. And continue practicing Shadow Dance in the Dreamscape... everyone had forgotten about Mongrel by now, surely. No doubt about it.

'Adult life is hard...'

They reached the shopping center with the help of a passenger PTV, which seemed a bit too luxurious to Sunny, but was a necessity, considering that it would have been hard for Effie to move around in public transport.

Not only because of her disability, but also because she was somewhat of a celebrity.

He had noticed at least three propaganda posters depicting her — the way she looked in the Dream Realm, to be exact — on buildings as the PTV drove toward the heart of the city. Even he had to agree that Effie looked... impressive. Like a beautiful goddess of war that knew no fear or would never surrender to anything, not even the hopeless darkness of the Forgotten Shore.

Triumph and perseverance... that was what people needed to see, considering how hard and dire life in the real world could seem sometimes. Even if it was just a sweet, benevolent lie.

It gave them hope, at least.

A hope gave them strength.

...Noticing his gaze, Effie grinned.

"Looking good, am I?"

He had no choice but to tell the truth:

"...Yeah."

She giggled.

"Do you remember how Scar and Park came up with a story to make me seem like some kind of a folk hero in the outer settlement, back when Gunlaug's people were searching for me? Well, the government ran wild with it, as you can see. Plus the fact that I was in charge of the first line during the siege... they made me into a poster girl for the young generation of the Awakened. Right after Nephis, of course."

Her face suddenly grew dark and solemn. After a long pause, Effie added:

"...It's a shame that neither of them lived long enough to see their stupid story become a worldwide hit. Park would have been so full of himself now, if he did. I can just about hear him boast."

And that was the bitter truth that people didn't get to see. The terrible price of the triumph they celebrated was known only to those who had gone through it, and somehow emerged alive on the other side.

The two of them spent some relaxing time in the shopping center, Effie resting in her wheelchair, Sunny pushing it from behind. From time to time, someone recognized her as the famous Raised by Wolves, and politely expressed their respect and admiration. He, on the other hand, seemed almost invisible.

Sunny didn't mind. It was better that way, really.

Being invisible suited a shadow very well.

More importantly, the act of buying a stupid refrigerator filled him with pure delight — he had been fantasizing about it for so long in the Sky Below, after all. In a sense, this whole thing had just been a giant obstacle on his epic quest to buy a fridge. And now, after overcoming countless dangers and hardships, that deadly quest was over!

Sunny worked out the details about the delivery, and soon, it was time to meet up with Kai.

He had never been to a posh restaurant before, but it seemed as though his outer appearance was decent enough to not look out of place — the mundane clothes he wore had been chosen with the help of the charming fashion icon himself, after all. Or maybe it was Effie's presence that made everyone there extra polite and a little bit reverent.

They entered a tastefully decorated space and saw a tall individual in a black cap and an ordinary face mask standing nearby. The weirdo was wearing sunglasses inside.

Before Sunny could understand what was happening, the masked individual quickly approached and gave him a big hug.

'Uh... does he really think that his disguise is fooling anyone? And why is he always trying to hug me?!'

Of course, it was Kai.

No amount of masks and sunglasses could hide the glamorous aura of the enchanting Nightingale.

It only made him stand out even more.

Sunny sighed.

'That dashing bastard...'

Chapter 463 | Shadow Slave

The three of them sat down and were presented with old-fashioned, paper menus to make their choice from. Sunny stared at the word "steak" for a bit, then shuddered and shifted his gaze to the salad section.

A few minutes later, a waiter approached to take their order. Effie spoke:

"I guess... three portions of bibimbap, three portions of samgyeopsal, three bowls of jjajangmyeon, and three portions of tteokbokki."

Then, she turned to them, smiled innocently, and asked:

"...Oh, and what about you, guys? What are you going to order?"

Sunny almost choked on the water he was drinking from a beautiful crystal glass.

The waiter, though, somehow managed to keep a straight face.

'What a professional...'

...Since they were seated in a private booth, Kai finally took off his cap and sunglasses, then smiled brilliantly. His voice sounded so sincere that it irked Sunny... a little.

"It's so nice to see you, Sunny. Effie and I were really worried!"

Sunny cleared his throat.

"That's, uh... thanks. I guess. I sort of... assumed that you wouldn't notice that I was gone."

Effie sighed.

"I am starting to wish that I didn't, you idiot! Anyway... what the hell happened? Why were you gone for an entire month?"

He hesitated, then said:

"Do you want to hear the long version, or the short version?"

Kai gave him a curious look:

"Let's start with the short version, I think?"

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"Alright. Well, in that case... it basically just wanted to find clues about a hidden treasure, but ended up almost being eaten by a treasure chest, falling into a bottomless abyss on top of a devil's corpse, and being burned by divine flames. Luckily, there is this voice I can hear in my head sometimes, and it helped me to only get burned a little."

Effie tilted her head and gave him a strange look. Kai's smile paled a little.

Sunny took a sip of water and continued in a carefree tone:

"Anyway, deep in the void, I found a black tower. There were some broken dolls and a rotting severed arm inside, which I... uh... ate, sort of. From the black tower in the abyss, I went to a white tower in the skies, and then rode back to the ground on a dragon's tail. That's basically it. Oh, and before all that, I kind of killed myself, I guess. Got a very nice Memory out of it, too!"

The two of them stared at him for a few moments, and then sighed almost simultaneously.

Kai shook his head.

"I take it back. Let's hear the long version..."

Sunny explained the sequence of events that led to him being gone for more than a month, keeping a few things to himself — like the true number of the miraculous coins he had collected, everything having to do with Weaver,

and the real reason for why he was so desperate to grow stronger as fast as possible.

When he was done, Effie giggled.

"Well. That [Fated] Attribute of yours has really been in overdrive lately, hasn't it?"

A sour expression appeared on Sunny's face.

"I guess. I had solid three months of nothing too bad or too good happening before that, though. But that's the thing, when it does finally happen, one thing usually leads to another. It's not all terrible, though. I had to work really hard to survive, but other than that, this expedition was a windfall for me."

Kai took a sip of tea, and then said thoughtfully:

"And what about this voice... Mordret? Do you trust him?"

Sunny hesitated, then shrugged.

"After I made sure that he is not just a figment of my imagination, I came to believe that Mordret is indeed one of the Lost, and most likely an Awakened just like we are. Most likely, he can communicate with me over a large distance because of the mirror shard I picked up after putting down that strange artificial Echo of his. Other than that, though... I don't know. He is very mysterious, to say the least."

He thought for a bit, and then added:

"Every piece of information he had given me turned out to be true, so far. And very helpful. I might have not been alive right now if not for him. So it's hard to say, really."

Kai smiled.

"Well, in that case, he is alright in my book."

Sunny paused as the waiter approached to bring the dirty dishes away and refill their glasses. After they were alone once again, he remained silent for a bit, then turned to Effie:

"But anyway... I do believe that what he said about the Seed is true. I think I can get the Obsidian Knife, which is supposed to make the Nightmare easier. So... I wanted to ask. Effie, I know that you can snap your fingers and have a dozen of the most powerful Awakened cohorts in the world accompany you to conquer the Second Nightmare. But... would you consider... challenging one with me?"

He expected her to tease him a little before giving an answer, but Effie remained quiet for a bit, an uncharacteristically serious expression on her face. After a while, she said:

"Challenge a Nightmare? Now, barely four months after we had become Awakened? Are you crazy, Sunny?"

He smiled.

"No, I don't mean now. Both of us need time to grow stronger and prepare, of course."

After saying that, Sunny looked away.

"...In seven months. After the winter solstice. That's when I plan to return to the Ivory Tower and go into that Seed. Will you come with me?"

Effie looked at him for a long time, then smiled, too.

"Sure. Why not? I wouldn't have it any other way, even. But, Sunny... I have one condition."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Really? What is it?"

Effie glanced at Kai, then said calmly:

"You need to convince Cassie to join us, too. I don't know what happened between the two of you, but it doesn't matter. Members of a cohort don't need to be friends. They just need to work well together... and our cohort worked perfectly, back on the Forgotten Shore. Caster is dead, and Nephis is gone... but Cassie is still here, and we both know how invaluable her Aspect is."

As Sunny's face darkened, she added:

"Plus, isn't she anchored at the Night Temple? She can help you get the Ivory Knife, as well. That princeling said that having both would be much better. A Nightmare is a Nightmare and will be absolutely deadly, no matter how prepared you are. Letting go of any advantage is stupid."

'Convince Cassie...'

A wave of anger and protest rose from the depths of Sunny's heart. Even though he had time to recover from what had happened in the Crimson Spire and understood the reason why Cassie had done what she had, he was still full of resentment. He was still hurt. He was still unwilling to even think about forgiving her...

But Effie was right.

No matter how he felt about Cassie, she was a boon for any cohort... especially now, since she had grown much more confident in her powers after becoming an Awakened. She also had other survivors of the Forgotten Shore following her as they waited for Nephis to return, and the connection to the Clan Valor emissaries in the Night Temple.

He didn't have to forgive her to fight side by side with her. He just had to trust that she won't betray him again... which he reluctantly did. Even though Sunny didn't want to give Cassie the benefit of the doubt, he knew that she had learned a bitter lesson.

A heavy sigh escaped from his lips.

'...What should I do?'

...It was at that moment that Kai, who had remained silent during their conversation, suddenly spoke:

"If you don't mind... count me in, too. I want to challenge the Second Nightmare with the three of you, guys, as well. In fact... even if you do mind, I insist!"

Chapter 464: Passion Blossoms Hotter in the Cold Heart of Despair

Both Sunny and Effie stared at him in surprise. After a while, the former huntress asked:

"Challenge the Nightmare with us? Don't you have a great position in Bastion, safe behind its walls? Have Sunny infected you with his madness?"

Kai frowned, then looked away. After a while, he said:

"Yes, I do. But... do you guys remember Aiko? She had a gambling den in the Bright Castle. Well, anyway, Aiko has a real talent for managing various things, so the agency hired her as my manager. One evening, we ended up talking about the Dark City."

A sad smile appeared on his face.

"Both of you only lived in the outer settlement, which had its own share of challenges, of course. Much more dire than what we who paid tribute faced in the Castle. But... but life wasn't that bright there, too."

He remained silent for a bit, then continued:

"Aiko had it way worse than I, though. Especially after one of the Pathfinders made a point of making her life a living hell... Andel, whose head Lady Nephis eventually took off his shoulders. We all knew it, but no one really helped."

A heavy sigh escaped from Kai's lips.

"Because what could anyone of us really do against one of the Pathfinders? But there was a lot of these compromises, of little lies we told ourselves as we closed our eyes to every dark, dirty thing that went on around us."

He looked at Effie, and said:

"People were starving in the outer settlement while we had our bellies full? Well, it wasn't our fault, because the Castle couldn't feed everyone. Surely, if there was more food, we would have shared. The Guards decided to harass someone? Well, that wasn't our fault either, because Tessai was too powerful, and we were too weak to resist him. And so on, endlessly. Everyone went as far as they needed to keep thinking of themselves as one of the good guys."

Kai grew silent, then said quietly:

"But, you see, it actually was our fault. All of us have committed the same crime... we were all weak. When I spoke to Aiko, I finally realized that in this world, being weak is a sin, too. At least for us, the Awakened. So... yes, I want to challenge the Second Nightmare, despite being safe and sound behind the walls of the Bastion. Because I never want to close my eyes to anything, ever again."

He looked at them, then smiled.

"Seven months? That's more than enough time for me to prepare. Plus, don't you need someone who can fly? Or are you going to simply jump into that weird undersky again and just hope to miss all those flames?"

Sunny coughed.

Kai had a point...

"Well... if you put it like this..."

After Kai's unexpected and poignant confession, they spent some time simply relaxing, laughing, enjoying their food, and chatting about this and that. Kai shared his experience of winning twelve consecutive weeks of the Avatar Singer and having to lose on purpose in the end, and the furor his face reveal and the subsequent announcement of Night&Gale's upcoming comeback album caused in the music industry and among the fans.

...He also complained about having to hire a second publicist because of a strange scandal he had gotten somehow involved in on the network, causing Sunny to look away in shame and keep his mouth tightly shut.

Effie mostly talked about all the fried chicken wings she had eaten and all the sorts of beer she had drunk, as well as what types of Nightmare Creatures she had hunted... and fried, and ate. She also joked about all the propaganda events the government wanted her to participate in, and the various ways with which she had managed to dodge most of them.

Sunny shared his experience of buying a house, and how it made him feel. He almost got sentimental thinking about his beautiful armored doors that Effie had smashed through, and about his new, expensive, shiny refrigerator.

Finally, Kai had to return to his schedule. Before they parted, though, he hesitated, then took out two colorful pieces of synthetic paper from his pocket with a very embarrassed expression on his face.

Without saying anything, he handed the brochures to Sunny and Effie.

Sunny took one, and stared at it with a confused expression.

It appeared to be an invitation of some sort. On it was an image of two people standing back to back with swords in their hands, both of them extremely beautiful, in a professional kind of way.

The guy was dark-skinned and handsome, with broad shoulders and an incredibly masculine face. The girl was thin and languid, with a slim figure that bordered on being gaunter than Sunny had been in his outskirts days. She had a doll's face with big, glistening eyes and full, slightly parted lips.

...She was also wearing a very strange and impractical armor, a regal cloak, and a very expensive silver wig.

'What the hell is this?!'

The title at the top of the brochure read:

"A Song of Light and Darkness"

And right below it, in a smaller font:

"Light shines brighter in the darkest of nights. Passion blossoms hotter in the cold heart of despair."

Sunny stared at the piece of paper in his hand with wide eyes.

"Kai... my friend... what did you just hand me?"

Effie laughed.

"No way! They finished filming it?"

Kai coughed.

"That, uh... yeah. The premier is in a week, actually. My agency arranged for me to attend and give a short speech. So, uh... will you two come, please?"

Sunny shook his head.

"No, wait... no, actually, what is this thing?!"

Effie looked at him with pity.

"Haven't you heard? They made a movie about us. I mean, about what happened on the Forgotten Shore... sort of. Have you not heard about all the casting news?"

He slowly shook his head.

"No!"

Then, Sunny frowned:

"Alright... alright, I get it. But why would I ever want to go and watch this? I would rather eat another Mordant Mimic! Sorry, Kai, but I am not

going..."

Effie looked at him with mischief and grinned.

"Oh... hey Sunny, do you remember how I said that I only had one condition to join you in the Nightmare? Well, scratch that. Actually, I have two..."

Chapter 465: Subjective Value | Shadow Slave

After a while, Sunny and Effie returned to his home —Just in time to receive the delivery of the refrigerator. Two tall and broad-shouldered store workers unloaded it from the cargo hold of their delivery vehicle and placed the big box down with a bit of strain. After that, one of them smiled and asked

"Good day. Where should we put it?" Sunny waved a hand. "Ah, need I tell you I'll do it myself?" The loaders looked at him doubtfully, then simply shrugged and left after getting his signature.

After the vehicle drove off, Sunny looked around, then eventually lifted the heavy box and carried it inside the house without any effort whatsoever.

Soon, the refrigerator was standing in the place where his old one used to be, the synthwood panels covering its doors blending in with the minimalist design of the kitchen. Effie and Sunny stared at it for a while, satisfied. Then, he said

"I like it a lot," Effie smiled. "Yeah, Beatty ties the whole room together. — doesn't it, well? In any case, I hope you won't break it again." After that she yawned and said in a tired voice "Ugh— I'm beat. Let's retire to the Dream Realm. What about you," Sunny thought for a few moments. Suddenly, a wide smile appeared on his face. "I have an errand to run, but after that, I am going in, too. Oh — wait. Where are you going to sleep,"

Effie shrugged. "Your guest room, where else?" He blinked. "Don't you need a sleeping pod," The former huntress giggled.

"I have one in your guest room. — What? Why are you staring at me? Like that, was I supposed to shuttle between the Academy and your comatose body every day,"

Sunny lingered for a bit then sighed.

"Make sense I guess I should have put one here, to begin with. What are the chances of me having mundane humans as guests,"

Then, he waved Effie goodbye and headed for the door as she turned her wheelchair around and rolled toward the guest bedroom

He was very excited about what he was going to do

Some time later, Sunny was in a beautifully lit store, pushing a shopping cart forward and slowly filling it to the brim with all kinds of food, as well as some other things. He was quietly whistling a cheerful tune, imagining all this stuff going into his new fridge

The contents of the cart would have cost more than he could ever dream to make, back when he had been living in the outskirts. But now, he could not only afford it, but even do so without having to count his money or feel apprehensive about the cost. He roared with lust, buying as much as he wanted of any quality that he wanted and bring it back home to his own home.

Life had changed so much.

After a while, he felt as though he got enough. Now that he had the Covetous Coffin, he could not only bring soul shards out of the Dream Realm, but also bring stuff from the real world to the Chained Isles. That meant so much, an unlimited amount of spices, all kinds of snacks to make the long days of exploring less dreadful. Various little things to make his life more comfortable.

Hell, if he wanted to, he could even bring a tent and sleep in it like a king.

'Incredible. Oh, this is simply incredible.'

Of course, not all of these things could be bought in a general store. But he could visit other places or simply order stuff on the network.

As he was heading for the registers, a familiar voice suddenly put him out of his thoughts. "Monni, can we get ice cream?" Sunny froze for a moment, then slowly turned his head and looked. His left, down a long aisle he was passing. There, a pale girl of around fourteen years was standing near a tall, graceful woman in her forties. An eight-year-old boy with blonde hair and a bright smile was pushing a tub of ice cream into her

hands_ Sunny watched Rain and her family for a.w moments, then turned away antl continued on his way, Leaving them behind A quiet sigh escaped from his lips

At Least she's doing fine_ Well, of course she is. I W only been gone for a month. Why would anything happen simply because I wasn't here,'

He reached the register, then heceated for a bit antl turned back

When he returned,.ere were several tubs of delicious ice cream added to his cart

As the Light of dawn shined on the Chained Isles, Sunny appeared on the Attar Island of the Sanctuary of Noces He stared at the sky, grimaced at the absence of the moon, and headed toward his room

Some time Late, though, he emerged from there wrth a peculiar wooden box following him wrth the help of eight small iron Legs With the Covetous Coffe in tow, Sunny walked into the garden, found a facet!. rock, Lifted the toothy box, antl carefully ptaced if near hceseiff

Then, he took out a single soul shard antl put it where everyone could see

Soon, one of the Awakened noticed him a. approached_ "Ah, Sunny, You're back, Looking to sell some shards again?" Sunny smiled. "Oh_ yes, sure_ But hey! That's not alt Brabant Emporium has some new merchandise," The Awakened Looked at him with doubt, then asked "Really? Like what," Sunny's grin grew wider. "How Lucky that you happened to ask Let's see_" He put his hand inside the coffer, which then somehow disappeared into the comparativ Then, Sunny began taking outvarious items, speaking as he did so

et

maLL box up to the shouLder.

"What do I have A store] Take a Look for yourself- toothpaste, Solt dean underwear, Salt Poppet and all ',In., spices! Personal hygiene products! Are

you a woman, No? Have a female friend, then? What really, Well, with the stuff I have here, at can be fixed Oh, what is ffis? Woudt you Look at that"

As more and more people gathered antl stared at the absolutely mundane, b. precious items that affiost none of them had access to in the Dream Realm with something resembling Lust in their eyes, Sunny's own gleamed with greed

"By the way, Brilliant Emporium is also proud. announce the opening of a conveyance sercece _ want our dedicated staff to bring something specific from the real. world, No problems Want. se. something to the real woad in.ead? That's not a problem, either_ For just a small commission "

'I am going to get rich So, so ricer Yes, soul shards were a rare commodity in the real. woad. But a good pair of underpants in the Dream Realm was, perhaps, even more valuable.

Chapter 466: A Gracious Invitation

Sunny spent a very pleasant morning selling all the stuff he had brought to the Dream Realm to a crowd of Awakened, each of them ravenous for the small comforts the real world could provide.

Very few had a close enough relationship with a Master or a Saint to be able to get these things here, in a place as remote as the Chained Isles. Things were slightly different in large Citadels like Bastion or Ravenheart, but on the frontier, most people simply had to figure out ways to get by with makeshift replacements. Still, nothing could compare to the real deal.

All in all, the Brilliant Emporium was performing splendidly.

Of course, Sunny did not charge too much for the small necessities he sold, but it added up. He wouldn't charge a whole soul shard, even if it was from a Dormant creature, for a tube of toothpaste. But a few tubes, plus a toothbrush, plus some soap and a box of tea leaves, and a promise to bring some sugar with him the next time? That could work.

Unlike before, he wanted soul shards instead of Memories. He was going to take these shards to the waking world, where their value was much higher.

Out there, soul shards came from only two sources: some were brought back by Ascended and Transcendent from their journeys into the Dream Realm, and some were scavenged from the corpses of the Nightmare Creatures that had invaded reality through a Gate.

They were always in short supply, because anyone in possession of a shard was more likely to use it themselves than to sell it for credits. Saturating their Soul Core meant much more to an Awakened than worldly currency... after all, dead men could not spend their riches.

The demand, on the other hand, was extremely high. Not only because all Awakened strived to become stronger, but also because young Sleepers,

especially, were able to use these shards to increase their chances of returning from their first venture into the Dream Realm alive.

That was the reason why even Caster, a scion of a prestigious Legacy clan, had not entered the Forgotten Shore with his core already fully saturated.

And that was the reason why Sunny was going to profit a lot from being in possession of his new favorite Memory... the magnificent Covetous Coffin.

After all, he — for better or worse — had no use for the soul shards whatsoever. He could not consume them, so there was no choice to be made between growing stronger himself or earning credits from others.

He was going to sell the shards, buy Memories, and feed them to Saint.

This simple system was almost unfairly lucrative for Sunny, because Memories, unlike shards, had no additional value in the real world. Every Sleeper and every Awakened could bring back Memories from the Dream Realm and freely exchange them there.

...Which did not mean that Memories were cheap. In fact, they were extremely expensive. But the correlation between the number of soul shards he would have to sell and the number of Memories he would be able to buy was very much in his favor.

And of course, Sunny also didn't even need good Memories. The worse, the better! The usefulness of a Memory dictated its price, but did not affect the amount of Shadow Fragments Saint received from consuming them at all.

His smile was growing wider and wider.

'Two months... three, max. That's how long it's going to take me to bring Saint to [200/200]. And what happens next? Oh my, I can hardly wait to find out...'

His pleasant thoughts, however, were eventually interrupted by a shadow falling over him.

'...Another customer?'

Sunny looked up and tensed a little, recognizing the person in front of him.

It was a young woman wearing a simple white garment... the same one that had escorted him to meet Master Roan before his journey to the Shipwreck Island.

The representative of the White Feather clan.

He suppressed a heavy sigh.

"Uh... what can I do for you?"

The young woman bowed slightly, then said in a neutral tone:

"Saint Tyris invites you to share a meal with her, Awakened Sunless."

'Curses... that is what I have been afraid of.'

Sunny shivered slightly.

What were the chances of him keeping all his secrets to himself during a conversation with the fearsome demi-god in charge of the Chained Isles?

Saints were creatures of another breed. It wasn't a coincidence that there were only a few dozen of them across all of humanity... they were not only the most powerful, but also the most skilled, strong-willed, brilliant, and deviously cunning members of the human race. Each was a force to be reckoned with.

Nothing less would suffice if one wanted to survive the harrowing trial of the Third Nightmare.

He wasn't sure of his ability to fool such a person.

Sunny forced out a weak smile.

"...It would be my pleasure."

The young woman nodded, then turned around, obviously expecting him to follow.

Sunny sighed, then dismissed the Covetous Cover and stood up from the rock.

It was time to face Sky Tide again.

The graceful stone chateau perched on top of the tall menhirs of the Sanctuary was just as Sunny had remembered it. The open pavilion at the very edge of the ancient monolith had not changed, as well. It was bathed in sunlight and exposed to winds, opening to a breathtaking view of the Chained Isles.

The Ivory Tower floated far above, shrouded in white clouds.

This time, there was a simple meal served for three people on the round table in the center of the pavilion, and both Master Roan and Saint Tyris were preparing to eat. The young woman led Sunny to them, gestured to a free chair, and then moved to stand silently by Sky Tide's side.

Sunny lingered for a bit, then said awkwardly:

"Uh... greetings, Lady Tyris, Master Roan. It's an honor to be invited to join you for dinner. Uh... lunch? Yeah. To join you for lunch."

Saint Tyris simply nodded and didn't say anything, but Master Roan looked at him and grinned. Then, he gestured to the food on the table.

"What are you waiting for, Sunless? Dig in! Food's growing cold."

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then smiled.

If there was one rule he tried to follow faithfully in his life... it was to never refuse free food.

Master Roan didn't have to ask him twice.

Chapter 467: Dinner with a Saint

It seemed that the conversation was not going to happen until after the meal, which suited Sunny fine. Not only did he get to enjoy a simple, but delicious food provided by the White Feather clan, but he also received a bit more time to think about what he was going to say, and how.

Sunny focused his attention on the plate in front of him, and after a few moments, a delighted smile found its way onto his face.

'That's really good!'

Noticing it, Master Roan chuckled:

"You like it? Well... I am not going to say that I cooked it myself, because that would be a lie, but I did hunt the beast with my own two hands. I also watched and gave very wise advice when Tyris was planting the vegetables!"

Sunny choked.

'Tyris planted... what? Sky Tide grew these vegetables herself?!'

The image of the stern Saint doing gardening did not fit into his mind at all. He threw a furtive glance at the unnaturally beautiful woman, and swallowed.

'Yeah... can't imagine it.'

Saint Tyris was calmly eating, not a single emotion appearing on her face. At the mention of her name, she looked at her husband for a second, and then returned to her meal without reacting in any way. Sunny didn't know if she was simply like that around strangers, or always aloof... in any case, it was hard to picture Sky Tide doing mundane things like gardening.

Not knowing what to think of it, he lingered for a few moments, then said awkwardly:

"...Yes. Thank you, it's very tasty."

It was too good, in fact. The food was disappearing from his plate at a concerning speed, which meant that he had to sort out his thoughts fast.

Basically, there were three things about his recent adventure that were better kept secret.

The first one was the miraculous coins and their connection to the Sanctuary of Noctis.

The second was Mordret... despite the fact that Effie and Kai had easily believed him, telling total strangers that there were voices in his head was not the best of decisions. Besides that, Sunny got the feeling that the lost prince might have been in not so friendly relationship with the emissaries of the Valor clan that resided on the Chained Isle.

Sky Tide did not serve Valor directly, but her clan was still allied to the rulers of Bastion, to the point that one might have gone so far as to call them a vassal clan.

And lastly, there was the whole thing about the Ebony and Ivory Towers, the connection between them, and the Seed of Nightmare. If it threatened to create a Gate at any moment, he would have felt obligated to inform the White Feather clan, so that someone else could destroy it before that happened. But since the Seed was far from blooming, he wanted it all for himself.

However, Sunny suspected that he will have to sacrifice one of these secrets to keep the others intact.

The question was... which one?

Finally, the food was gone from their plates, and the young woman in white poured beautiful ember tea into their cups. Sunny blew on his, and glanced at Master Roan:

"So, uh... not to appear impolite, sir, but to what do I owe the pleasure?"

'Here it comes...'

He hesitated, then added:

"Is it about my friends making a ruckus after I have gone on an unusually long expedition? You weren't too inconvenienced by having to look for me, were you?"

He was expecting a confirmation, but instead, a surprised expression appeared on the strapping Master's face.

"Look for you? Uh... why would we look for you?"

Noticing that Sunny was confused, he remained silent for a moment, and then smiled.

"Ah! There must have been a misunderstanding. Nightingale and Raised by Wolves did, indeed, bring your disappearance to the attention of our clan. I was going to explore the places where you had been seen last to investigate, but luckily, Lady Cassia arrived at the Sanctuary just in time. She informed us that you would return in a few weeks, so we didn't have to worry."

A tense smile froze on Sunny's face.

"She did? Well... I'm glad your time wasn't wasted, then."

'Damn it! Damned Cassie and her damned visions! How much does she know?'

He took a sip of tea to hide his expression behind the cup for a second.

That changed things... on purpose or not, Cassie had helped him avoid the scrutiny of having to explain his absence to the White Feather clan. That, however, posed another problem.

And that problem was Song of the Fallen herself. The timing of her visit to the Sanctuary of Noctis and this strange action of hers were probably not a coincidence... what was she playing at?

Or was he being too paranoid, looking for a meaning where there was none? Cassie was not some machiavellian mastermind, after all... unlike Sunny and Nephis both. At least she had not been.

Putting down the cup, Sunny cleared his throat.

"But then... why did you invite me?"

Master Roan smiled and produced a folded piece of paper from his pocket.

"Oh, it was just to hand you this. Lady Cassia left you a message before leaving on an expedition with her cohort."

Sunny tried to seem calm and nonchalant as he took the piece of paper and unfolded it. Inside, two words were written in awkward handwriting:

"Desecrated Grove"

They were, without a doubt, left by Cassie. After becoming blind, writing was hard for her. That's why the penmanship seemed so crude.

'What the hell is that supposed to mean?'

Desecrated Grove... Sunny had heard of that place. It lay west of the Sanctuary, separated from it by a stretch of long chains. The Grove itself was not the most deadly of territories, but there were several Corrupted creatures nesting on islands in close vicinity to it.

Had Cassie known that he would want to speak to her, and left him a direction to where to find her?

Why would she lead her cohort to that remote place, which was situated as far from the Hollow Mountains as one could get on the Chained Isles?

'Strange...'

Sunny folded the note, put it under the vambrace of the Puppeteer's Shroud, and smiled:

"Thank you."

Things like that weren't too strange. Since he had gone on a long expedition and missed Cassie, who was planning to remain in the Dream Realm for a while herself, it was logical to communicate through messages. She could have just sent one to his communicator, though...

Although, if he was honest with himself, there was a big chance that he would ignore the message if she had.

Sunny finished his tea, and then asked cautiously:

"So... I can go?"

Master Roan shrugged.

"Sure. It was nice to see you again, Sunless. I hear your Emporium is doing well!"

Sunny couldn't believe his luck. Expressing his gratitude, he rose to leave.

Just as he did, though, Saint Tyris spoke for the first time. Piercing him with a penetrating gaze, she said evenly:

"...Have you been to the Reckoning Island?"

He froze.

Under the stare of Sky Tide, twisting the truth didn't seem that wise anymore.

Sunny hesitated, then said simply:

"Yes."

Saint Tyris looked at him for a few moments, then turned away.

"Next time someone asks, say no."

Taken aback, Sunny stared at the stunningly beautiful woman for a bit, gather his courage, and then quietly asked:

"May I know... why?"

Sky Tide kept her gaze at the breathtaking vista of the Chained Isles below them. Then, in a calm voice, she answered:

"You may not."

Chapter 468: Desecrated Grove | Shadow Slave

Sunny descended from the White Feather's aery in a complicated mood.

If he ever had doubts that the lost prince was harboring dire secrets, now, there were none. Why else would Saint Tyris caution him to not speak about the Mirror Beast, who had seemingly been the only trace left of Mordret's existence?

Mordret had conquered the First Nightmare when he was only twelve... such an individual, surely, would have been as famous as Nephis back in the real world. And yet, Sunny had never heard of him, or of anyone who had accomplished the same feat.

It was almost as if someone very powerful had purposefully erased any mention of the mysterious prince from history.

...How had he lost his physical body, to begin with? And where was his spirit body in the Dream Realm? Did... did he even have one? He must have had it once, at least. The pack Sunny had found on the Reckoning contained a detailed map of the Chained Isles, with the word "hope" written on it next to a question mark.

Back then, he thought that the owner of the pack had been killed by the Mirror Beast. Now, however, he suspected that it had belonged to Mordret himself.

So, the lost prince had at least visited the Chained Isles before disappearing. Was the great clan Valor complicit in his disappearance? Sunny had no real reason to come to that conclusion, other than the fact that the Chained Isles were in their sphere of influence, and that Saint Tyris hinted at her knowledge of the nature of the Mirror Beast.

But why hadn't she killed it herself?

'I am going to have to ask Mordret a lot of questions when he appears.'

Which wasn't going to happen for many days, sadly.

Until then, Sunny had other matters to attend to.

He glanced at the sun and judged that it had barely reached its zenith. The moon wasn't going to appear for a while... so, even though the desire to place his precious coins on the altar gnawed on him, he decided to address the most pressing problem first.

...Cassie.

No matter how reluctant Sunny was to face his former friend, he had to speak to her. He couldn't make plans for the future without knowing who would be by his side as he challenged the Second Nightmare.

And he absolutely needed to challenge it.

Collecting essence was fine, but becoming a Master would change the power dynamic between him and Nephis much more. And even though creating future cores would be harder after he achieved a higher Rank, being an Ascended also meant that there would be much fewer things out there that could squash him like a bug.

...Not only among the Nightmare Creatures, but also among the humans. The more crumbs of information about the Sovereigns Sunny learned, the more disturbed he became. He was distrustful by nature, so he didn't believe that these hidden overlords would not try to exert their influence on him or try to destroy him one day, simply by virtue of being able to do so.

And even without this threat... there were hundreds of Master in the world, which meant that there were hundreds of people who could kill him without breaking a sweat. But if he became a Master himself... well, then there would only be a few dozen individuals he would have to be really wary of.

Like Saint Tyris.

...Not to mention that, as an Ascended, he would be free to come and go from the Dream Realm as he wished. He would even be able to abandon it

forever, and never come back.

Wouldn't that be a nice choice to have?

'So... the Desecrated Grove it is.'

Sunny frowned, then returned to his room, took out his map from the Covetous Coffers, and spent some time adding all the details he remembered from Mordret's map onto it. Soon, he was in possession of an intricately detailed depiction of most of the Chained Isles on his hands, complete with descriptions of what dangers he was likely to meet, and where.

With its help, traveling to his destinations was going to be much safer.

Sunny studied the route to the Desecrated Grove and sighed.

'...Shouldn't be too hard. I can probably reach it by morning, and return to the Sanctuary the next day at night, when the moon is high in the sky.'

And finally get to use the coins he had bled so much to earn.

He dismissed the Covetous Coffers, stretches his limbs, and headed toward the exit from the Sanctuary.

The journey to the remote island that Cassie named in her note indeed turned out to be uneventful. Sunny rode the heavenly chains in the form of the shadow and traversed the islands on foot, avoiding any Nightmare Creature that crossed his path.

The southern part of the Chained Isles was relatively safe, or at least safer than the northern part. Well, no surprise — it was bordering regions of the Dream Realm that had been tamed by humans more than a decade ago, while to the north there was nothing except for the dreadful Hollow Mountains.

The Desecrated Grove itself was somewhat near the main route from one of the Great Chains — which connected all of the Chained Isles to the rest of

the Dream Realm — to the Sanctuary of Noctis. People who were either coming to or leaving the region used that route to travel between the Great Chain and the Citadel, so it was often patrolled by the White Feather forces.

Sunny traveled along the established route, then left it to go deeper into the dangerous wilderness of the flying islands. He carefully avoided all the places where Corrupted Nightmare Creatures were known to dwell, and kept his eyes open for any sign of danger.

However, nothing that couldn't be avoided happened. None of the islands Sunny wanted to cross were rising, so he even managed to escape having to endure the Crushing.

The sun rolled down over the horizon and disappeared, and the moon followed its example.

As the first light of dawn ignited in the east, Sunny flew through the shadows and then soared high into the air, cresting the edge of a large island and softly landing on its soil.

The Desecrated Grove... he had arrived.

Sunny let out a heavy sigh.

...He had almost hoped that some terrible monstrosity would attack him on the way, making it so he wouldn't have to meet Cassie. The searing mess of emotions he felt toward her... was much scarier than any Nightmare Creature could ever hope to be.

At the end of the day, humans were much harder to deal with than monsters.

Chapter 469: Fire Keepers | Shadow Slave

The Desecrated Grove was a large island, its surface overtaken almost entirely by a forest of twisted, charred, dead trees. The ground was covered by a thick layer of ash, which was often thrown into the air by the strong winds. Grey flakes rained down from the sky.

There were many Nightmare Creatures nesting in the dark forest, and although most of them were only of the Awakened Rank, one had to be careful to not get ambushed, surrounded, or stumble upon an especially ferocious abomination.

Sunny couldn't even begin to guess why Cassie would choose such a place to establish a camp.

However, he could already see the signs of human presence.

There were four chains connecting the Desecrated Grove to other islands, but the one he himself had used was the most convenient. Any sane leader would have chosen the same route, and even though the Crushing was capable of making anyone's path unpredictable, the other three were just too much of a risk.

That's why Sunny wasn't surprised to see human footprints leading toward the menacing wall of blackened dead trees, already mostly covered by a new layer of ash. There were also signs of a battle, with several misshapen carcasses laying on the ground and showing clear signs of their soul shards being removed.

Judging by the fact that they were only partially devoured by the scavenging Nightmare Creatures, Cassie's cohort must have passed through no more than a week ago.

Sighing, Sunny tied a piece of cloth around his mouth and nose, summoned the Cruel Sight, and started following the footprints.

Soon, he entered the ashen veil of the twisted forest. His ability to see through any shadow proved to be invaluable once again: if not for that gift, he would have been scared witless, expecting a sudden attack to come from the surrounding darkness at any moment.

With his sight, the Shadow Sense, and the ability to see all around himself with the help of one of the shadows, Sunny felt confident that nothing would be able to get close to him unnoticed... at least not on this comparatively tame island.

But that was the thing about the Dream Realm. Even creatures that were supposed to be easy to deal with could kill you in a second if you weren't careful enough. Tame or not, everywhere in this godforsaken world was a potential death trap.

As Sunny went deeper into the forest, he discovered more signs of Cassie's cohort passing through. There were marks left behind by violent skirmishes, as well as several abandoned campsites. It seemed as though the Fire Keepers had been taking their time, slowly exploring the path ahead and moving their camp further and further into the depth of the Desecrated Grove after clearing a long stretch of it.

'Why travel here all the way from the Night Temple? She had to cross the entire region, getting away from the Hollow Mountains, only to get stuck on an unexceptional island. I just don't get it.'

Sunny was clearly missing something...

With a slight frown, he turned into a shadow and glided through the darkness, covering much more distance with every minute than he had been on foot. He still preferred to be cautious, though, sending one of the shadows ahead and moving slow enough to be able to react in time if something unexpected happened.

After an hour or so, he finally found them.

Cassie and her cohort were camped at a secluded clearing that was around halfway to the heart of the island, dangerously far removed from the edge.

If the Desecrated Grove entered the ascent phase, the time window for them to get back to the chain before the Crushing became deadly would be extremely narrow.

Since it was early morning, most of the members were asleep, with only two lookouts standing watch with torches in their hands. Sunny observed them for a few seconds from the shadows, and then sent his own forward.

He recognized both of the watchmen, since they had spent a lot of time together during the struggle for the throne of the Bright Castle, as fellow members of Neph's faction.

The Fire Keepers were comprised of about forty survivors of the Forgotten Shore — those who had decided against pledging their allegiance to the Legacy clans that wanted to recruit them, as well as the government, and had not become fully independent like Effie and Sunny had.

Although Cassie was their nominal leader, she didn't command the whole host herself. Instead, Neph's followers were divided into several cohorts, each operating in different regions of the Dream Realm. Fire Keepers were not a formal organization, but more of a loose alliance of people who shared similar beliefs and principles, the main being the hope that Changing Star was going to return alive one day.

...Sunny's shadow entered the circle of light created by one of the torches, glared at the lookout, and then waved at him.

The young man stared at it with wide eyes.

"What the hell?!"

The other swiftly turned, summoning her weapon.

"What is it?"

The first one remained silent for a moment, then sighed.

"Ah, crap..."

He massaged his temple, as if experiencing a headache.

"...I think it's Sunny."

There were eight people in Cassie's cohort, every one of them a familiar face.

...Well, Sunny more or less knew all of the survivors of the Forgotten Shore, had fought with them back to back, so that wasn't surprising. What did surprise him, though, was how warm they welcomed him.

Even if some were clearly displeased with having to wake up a bit early and worry of his entrepreneurial ambitions — which they had been amply subjected to during the war for the Bright Castle — they were still clearly happy to see Sunny. Soon, his shoulder began to hurt a little from all the friendly slaps it received.

"Would you look at that! Four months on these damned islands, and this is the first time we actually cross paths!"

"How have you been, Sunny?"

"Oh! I was so sad that we missed you in the Sanctuary. Glad you decided to visit!"

Sunny smiled weakly and responded to their greetings, feeling both strangely warm inside and extremely uncomfortable with all the attention.

Truth be told... he was glad to meet them again, too. He still couldn't quite believe that anyone had escaped the Forgotten Shore, let alone a whole hundred of young men and women, some of whom were in front of him right now.

After the greetings were done, he looked around and raised an eyebrow.

"Uh... sure, guys. Likewise. But where's Cassie?"

The Fire Keepers glanced at each other, then one of them smiled.

"Oh, right! You must be dying to see her."

'...Not exactly.'

The girl who spoke shook her head and turned toward a path leading somewhere away from the camp.

"Let's go. I'll take you."

...Not too far from the camp, a deep hole was dug near the roots of one of the dead trees. Beside it, with her back to him, stood a delicate girl with pale blond hair and an elegant rapier hanging in a scabbard on her belt.

Hearing their footsteps, Cassie turned around. A small smile appeared on her face.

"Sunny. You've made it..."

Chapter 470: Come Winter | Shadow Slave

Cassie had changed since the last time they met.

Her hair was longer, and there was a strange silver half-mask covering her eyes, its surface blind and intricately engraved. It matched the polished steel of the armor she was wearing on top of a midnight blue coat, comprised of a short cuirass, vambraces, greaves, and a segmented pauldron.

The Quiet Dancer hung on her belt, but there was also a long dagger opposite it, its guard twisting upward.

What changed most of all, however, was her demeanor. The blind girl seemed... much older, somehow. Firmer, poised, but also weary. As if pressed down upon by the weight of years.

'What? What years? She's younger than me!'

Sunny struggled a little, then pretended to smile, too, for the benefit of the young Fire Keeper who no doubt expected a warm reunion.

No one knew what had happened between them, after all.

"Yeah. I received your note... cryptic as it was. And here I am. In the flesh."

The girl who had led him to Cassie glanced at them, then made an excuse and went back to the camp, tactfully deciding to remove herself from what she thought was going to be an emotional meeting of two old friends.

...Former friends, really.

Sunny hesitated a little, then asked:

"So... how have you been?"

Cassie sighed, then turned back to the excavated roots of the charred tree.

After a while, she spoke:

"Not so good, actually."

Her voice sounded distant.

"We... we have tried to venture into the Hollow Mountains, as you must know. But it was hopeless. That place is pure death, for anyone who dares set foot into the mist. We hoped to find a way back to the Forgotten Shore. In the end, however, we were lucky to simply escape alive."

Cassie remained silent for a bit, then asked:

"What about you?"

Sunny grinned:

"Me? Oh, I've never been better..."

With that, he summoned the Covetous Coffers, fished out some fresh, fragrant fruit from it, and sat down on a nearby stump. Taking a big bite out of a juicy peach, he chewed it with gusto, and then glanced at the blind girl.

"Oh, sorry. I only brought enough for one."

...Yes, Sunny knew that he was being ridiculously petty. But so what? Pettiness was his middle name. Figuratively speaking.

"So, you failed to return to the Forgotten Shore, and now... what are you doing, exactly? Why are you digging up trees in this vile forest?"

Cassie smiled a little, then answered evenly:

"...I am looking for something."

Then, she turned away from the hole and faced him.

"Yes, I told the White Feather clan that you will return alive. No, I did not see a vision of where you were, and what you did in the past month."

Sunny stared at her with a dark expression:

'What is this?! She can read minds now?!'

"...And no, I can't read minds. If you must know, my Second Ability allows me to sense what will happen in the next few seconds. That's why I can walk around without a cane, and knew what you were going to say."

He grimaced.

'That's... going to be very annoying, I think.'

Sunny looked at Cassie, reevaluating her armor and weapons. With an Ability like that, she might have become a very formidable fighter. Or not. He didn't really understand how it worked, to tell the truth.

So, he asked curiously:

"Does that mean that you can see now?"

Cassie shook her head.

"No... not exactly. But if I want to take a step forward, and sense falling into a ravine, I can walk around it instead. If I sense being pierced by a sword, I can try to deflect it. And if I sense being asked a question, I can answer it."

He thought for a bit, then said:

"So, what is my next question?"

The blind girl simply shook her head.

"I don't need to waste soul essence to guess. You want to know how I knew that you will come back to the Sanctuary in one piece."

Sunny finished his fruit, threw the pit into the hole, then smiled:

"Indeed. If you did not spy on my recent adventures, then how did you know that I wasn't going to die?"

Cassie lingered for a bit, then turned away. After a while, she said:

"It's still spring."

He scowled.

"What does that have to do with anything? You knew that I would be fine because it's spring?"

Cassie smiled.

"Yes. I knew that you wouldn't die. Because, you see..."

She paused for a moment, and then said calmly:

"...I already saw you die, in winter. Both of us, actually."

After Cassie dropped that bomb, Sunny simply stared at her for a whole minute, his eyes wide and the words refusing to come out of his mouth. Finally, he gritted his teeth and hissed:

"What the hell?! You saw us die?!"

Cassie sighed, then gave him a simple nod.

"Yes."

Sunny growled.

"Elaborate!"

The blind girl hesitated for a little while, then asked evenly:

"Are you sure you want to know? You've seen what happened the last time I shared my vision with someone, and tried to challenge fate."

A dark, resentful expression appeared on Sunny's face. With his voice full of anger, he spat:

"Who cares?! Tell me what you saw this instant!"

Cassie sighed and turned to face him.

"Alright. But remember... remember what happened to the three of us, before. How we tried to deceive fate, but were played by fate instead."

She grew quiet for a moment, and then said:

"This is what I saw: there was a crumbling island falling into the Sky Below, and the two of us — bloodied, mangled, and weak — falling down with it. It was snowing. Above us, a giant bird flew, wreathed in thunderclouds. It was fighting a terrifying black wyvern, their blood falling down like rain. Then the darkness swallowed us... and we were gone."

Cassie looked down, then added solemnly:

"That was how we died."

Chapter 471: Quid Pro Quo

When Cassie was done speaking, Sunny remained silent for a bit. Then, he said:

"Anything else? More details?"

The blind girl shook her head.

"Because of the blizzard, it was hard to see what surrounded the crumbling island, and it was already too damaged to recognize it. So... no, no more details. Uh... you were wearing a metal armor, I think? Not the Puppeteer's Shroud."

Sunny massaged his temples with a bleak expression on his face.

"Well... it's not as bad as I expected."

Cassie tilted her head a little.

"It's not?"

A dark smile appeared on his lips.

"We already know that your visions are easy to misinterpret. You haven't seen us die, really... right? The light go out of our eyes, our bodies being torn apart, and so on. You just saw us badly injured and falling into the darkness. So what? I have already fallen into the Sky Below once, and here I am, good as new."

The blind girl hesitated.

"You fell into the Sky Below?"

Sunny waved a hand dismissively.

"Yes, but that doesn't matter. Wait, no... actually, it does matter. It's the reason I came to see you. I have almost forgotten because of this... charming revelation of yours."

After that, he grew silent, thinking about Cassie's vision of their death.

Despite Sunny's bravado, inside, he wasn't as nonchalant about it as he wanted to appear. Yes, her visions had been misleading in the past... but not all of them. Some were as straightforward as possible. And yes, although he had already gone through the endless void below the Chained Isles once, there was no guarantee that he would survive it second time, not unless he had chosen to do so himself.

After the Twisted Rock was destroyed by the Crushing, Sunny managed to survive due to three reasons: one of them was Mordret, one was that he had already been near the Tear, and the other was the [Where is my eye?] enchantment that he had used in a moment of desperation.

That enchantment had almost killed him, itself, and only failed to do so because his already exhausted shadow essence ran out just at the right time. If his reserves had not been depleted, and he was forced to endure staring into the eternity of Fate for a few seconds more, his mind would have been destroyed completely.

If he was thrown into the Sky Below once more, away from the Tear, there would be a very slim chance of him finding the rift in the ocean of divine flame again. Especially if he was as badly wounded as Cassie implied.

And there were giant birds fighting wyverns in the sky above.

So, what he had to do now was... well, what the hell was he supposed to do? The vision did not provide any actionable information. The only thing Sunny could think of was to work really hard to get himself a flight-capable Memory or Echo before winter.

And maybe make a will.

He sighed.

"So... what have you been doing to prevent the two of us from dying? How can you calmly dig around in the mud, knowing what is going to happen?"

Cassie lingered for a moment, then smiled.

"In fact, I am digging around in the mud for that very reason."

Sunny snorted.

"What are you hoping to find there? A pair of wings?"

She shook her head.

"No... I am just hoping to find a preserved root."

'A root? What can a root do to save us from dying?'

He kept quiet for a bit, then said:

"Alright. Suit yourself. Anyway, I wanted to talk with you about something."

Cassie looked into the depths of the forest, then nodded.

"About what?"

Sunny gathered his thoughts, then explained:

"I have found a Nightmare Seed. A very special one, that contains a very special Second Nightmare. And I want to challenge it after the winter solstice... actually, scratch that. I want to challenge it by the end of the autumn."

His initial plan was to give himself and his companions seven months to prepare, but considering what Cassie saw happening in winter, these plans had to change. Whatever it was that she predicted, facing it as a Master would be much more desirable than facing it as an Awakened.

...Unless her vision took place inside the Nightmare, of course.

Regardless, now, he decided to return to the Ivory Tower before the autumn was over. Six months was a tight amount of time to get ready, but now so different from his initial plan. He could make it work, provided that other people whom he wanted to take with him would, too.

"That Seed is also located in a very special place. In fact, it's right above our heads, in the Ivory Tower. I found a way to get there without being killed by the Crushing... although that other path is, arguably, just as dangerous."

Sunny pointed down.

"It's in the Sky Below. Effie and Kai are coming to the Chaines Isles to join me. We hope that you will challenge the Nightmare with us, too. Oh... and we'll need your help getting into the Night Temple. There's an item we need to retrieve there."

Cassie faced him and remained silent for a while. With her eyes being hidden by a mask and her face unmoving, it was hard to tell what she was feeling or thinking about.

Finally, she said:

"You want me to join? After what I have done to you?"

Unseen to her, a cold expression appeared on Sunny's face. He looked at the blind girl for a long time, then shrugged.

"Why not? We don't have to be friends to go into a Nightmare together. We don't even need to like each other. We can just be... temporary allies. Wasn't that what I was to you, anyway? If you can handle that, so can I. I don't mind being used, as long as I get to use you in return. Pretty simple."

Cassie turned away and didn't say anything for a few moments. Then, she answered:

"Alright. I will go to the Night Temple with you, and help you conquer the Second Nightmare. But... I want your help with something in return."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"My help? With what?"

The blind girl hesitated for a second, and then said:

"You have been to the Shipwreck Island, haven't you? The creature that dwells there... in a few months, I want you to help me kill it."

Chapter 472 : Worthy Reward

Sunny stared at the blind girl with surprise clearly written on his face. Allowing this surprise to seep into his voice, he asked: "The vine creature? You want to kill that thing?" Why would she want to attempt to do something that dangerous? Cassie nodded.

He shook his head.

That bastard sprawls through the entire island, its vines buried underground. It is Corrupted, which means that our weapons will barely be able to out it. And, if that was not bad enough, the vines produce clouds of deadly poison. Are you sure that you want to attack It?

The blind girl lingered for a few moments, then answered calmly:

"It is a Corrupted Monster, indeed. It is terrifying and lethal, yes, But I am sure that we can destroy it, with enough preparation. Everyone has weaknesses, after all. That creature is susceptible to fire, for example. There must be other things we might be able to exploit, too!

Sunny thought for a while, then shrugged. "Fine. I will help your cohort fight the monstrosity on the Shipwreck Island. I will not promise that we will succeed, though! Cassie sighed. Then we have a deal. My cohort and I will remain in the Desecrated Growth until our business here is done. I expect it to take a month, at least Maybe more. After, we will return to the Sanctuary, recuperate, and proceed to the Shipwreck Island!

She paused for a moment and then added: "And then, I will help you challenge the Second Nightmare: Sunny smiled. "If we don't die before that, you mean?" The blind girl turned back to the roots of the dead tree. "...Yes. If we don't die before that!

On his way back to the Sanctuary, Sunny had a lot to think about.

Firstly, there was the fact that he would have to cooperate with Cassie again, which made him feel all sorts of complicated emotions. The manner

of their relationship, at least, was set clear — it was purely an alliance of convenience, and nothing else.

He could put away his resentment for the sake of mutual benefit. After all, Sunny could be a very pragmatic person when he needed to be.

Secondly, there was the perspective of returning to the wreck of the ancient ship, this time to do bathe with the vine monster that ruled over the island. Sunny knew very well how dangerous that thing was, so he had a lot of preparations to do if he wanted to come out of that fight in one piece.

The divine flame augmentation of the Cruel Sight, however, was going to come in very handy.

And lastly, there was the ominous prediction that Cassie had made about both of them dying sometime in winter. Or falling into the Sky Below, at least. That_ he didn't even know what to think about that. However, Sunny was not going to let this vision affect his decisions. The last time he had tried to act on the knowledge received through Cassie's prophetic gift did not end well for him_ or. anyone, for that matter.

The best thing to do was to keep it in his mind, but continue'. act as if nothing had changed. At least he thought that this was the best course. Tired and mentally exhausted from the long journey to and back from the Desecrated Grove, Sunny approached the Sanctuary of Noctis in the middle of the night. His shadow essence reserves were almost depleted, and his head buzzed from all the thoughts swarming inside of it. Landing on the soft grass and hearing the familiar sound of water falling over the edge of the island, Sunny gritted his teeth. "Forget about it for now. First things first.: The moon was high in the sky, which meant that he was finally going to get his sweet, enchanting reward. His desire to find the source of the miraculous coins the dead Chain Worm had brought with it to the Iron Hand Island staled this whole ordeal, and now, the coins would be its end. His prize was waiting for him up ahead_ Entering the Sanctuary, Sunny walked through the empty garden and approached the clear pond in its center. Stopping fora couple of moments to make sure that no one was watching him, he then crossed the stone path leading to the small island in its center. There, a white altar stood in the shade of an ancient tree, and an obsidian

knife lay on its surface. 'The moment of truth.: Sunny summoned the Covetous Coffin, took out one of the gold coins out of it, and placed it on the altar. The coin shimmered, reflecting the moonlight and then disappeared. Your shadow grows stronger] A big smile appeared on Sunny's face. Summoning the runes, he read:

Shadow Fragments, [224/2000], 'It works!' Initially, Sunny thought of going about using the coins in a slow and deliberate manner, throwing a dozen or so on the altar each time he had to return to the real world — to minimize the chances of being noticed and well as arising suspicion.

But now that the reward was in his sight he decided against It No_ he wanted all of it right now. He deserved it.

Putting the wooden box on the altar, he turned it to the side, and then put his hand inside. A moment later, a stream of golden coins flowed onto the white surface.

Then, they all started to disappear. [Your shadow grows stronger.] [Your shadow grows stronger.] [Your shadow grows stronger...]

In the end, Sunny ended up sacrificing all fourteen hundred or so coins to the altar.

Frightened to believe that it actually happened, he summoned the runes again, then rubbed his eyes, and read the line describing his shadow fragments three times in a row — just to make sure that his eyes weren't deceiving to him.

Luckily, they weren't. The runes now showed, 'I did it.. I did it?

In the first two months on the Chained Isles, Sunny worked really hard to hunt down Nightmare Creatures and slay them. And yet, he had only been able to collect two hundred fragments. His last journey, harrowing as it had been, though... gave him so much more. A wide grin appeared on Sunny's face. '...Who said that greed is a sin? It's a virtue! A goddamn virtue, I say!'

Chapter 473 : Mobius Loop

A Big Hit with Young Adults Feel the fighting spirit surge and burst through your Beautiful Warriors' tight armors.

Queen's Blade Visit Site

Because of the sudden influx of so many shards, Sunny got disoriented and swayed. His body was subtly rebuilding itself, growing stronger, more powerful_ the difference was stark enough for him to feel it with every fiber of his being.

As Awakened absorbed soul shards—or shadow fragments, in his case—the capacity of their cores grew, and their physical capability was slightly enhanced. Usually, it happened at such small increments that the difference was hard to judge, but this time, Sunny had done something pretty preposterous and consumed fourteen hundred shadow fragments all at once.

He wondered if anyone else in history had accomplished the same feat. 'Not... not likely.... Grabbing the edge of the altar to support himself, he endured the strange and euphoric sensation as best as he could. How could anyone do such a thing, if — as far as Sunny knew — everyone except Nephis and him were limited to having only one core? They wouldn't

even be able to absorb this much...

Back on the Forgotten Shore, Sunny had gone from having almost no shadow fragments to fully saturating his core at a thousand. In the process, he went from being no different from a mundane human, to the pinnacle of humanly possible, to breaking past those limits.

Becoming an Awakened had elevated him even further above what was considered normal. He was much stronger and faster than any mundane human could ever hope to be, and capable of enhancing his prowess even more with essence, achieving truly superhuman might.

And now, he went through a transformation that was similar in scale. his rise on the Forgotten Shore, becoming so much more powerful. In fact, he was now probably the strongest Awakened both in the waking world and in the Dream Realm, with the exception of those whose Aspects directly enhanced their physique.

And even then, he could still double_ even triple his physical ability with the help of the shadows.

'Insane!'

Sunny drew in a deep breath, then silently flexed his muscles, feeling a new strength course through his veins. He felt.. incredible. Incredibly strong, incredibly fast, incredibly resilient

But that wasn't all.

The capacity of both of his Shadow Cores was also dramatically enhanced, almost doubling in a matter of seconds. Therefore, his use of shadow essence were now also much deeper.

That meant that he could fight at his peak form for longer, use the active enhancements of his Memories more, remain in the form of a shadow for a bigger amount of time, control his shadows at a larger distance, and travel further when using Shadow Step. In short.. Sunny had just become even more of a menace. Slowly getting accustomed to his new and improved physique, he couldn't help but smile. Now that he had finally made use of the miraculous coins, his previous disaster of an expedition came into perspective. Despite how much he had suffered and how close he had brushed with death, it all felt worth it, somehow.

His goal was to grow stronger, and Sunny had just made a big step toward that goal. _It felt good. While Sunny was consumed with triumphant thoughts, his gaze fell on the obsidian knife that lay on the altar. He lingered for a while, then cautiously reached with his hand and touched the cold stone handle. Will it work?' That knife remained on the altar of the Sanctuary for as long as humans lived there. Pretty much every Awakened

that had ever set foot into the Citadel tried to raise it off the white surface at least once... including Sunny.

But none of them succeeded. The knife seemed to weigh more than the entire island itself, as if it was glued to the altar. No matter how much people tried, no one had ever managed to move it even by a millimeter.

However, when Sunny used the miraculous coins for the first time, he seemed to have noticed that the obsidian knife moved a little.

Therefore... he had made a conclusion that if he were to place enough coins on the altar, the knife might become detached from it and fall into his hands.

Holding his breath, Sunny wrapped his fingers around the handle. '...Here goes nothing?' Putting all of his strength into the pull, he tried to lift the obsidian blade of the altar. The knife, however, offered no resistance at all. It behaved like any knife would, easily sliding off the white stone, which then caused Sunny to lose his balance and tumble to the ground in a graceless roll. Sitting up, he stared at the knife in his hand with wild eyes. Then, he shuddered. 'Crap!'

Sunny half-expected for the entire Sanctuary to suddenly plunge into the Sky Below, or for the Gateway to stop functioning. That's why he wanted to just lift the knife a little, and then place it back down if something had gone awry. Instead, he was now a few steps away from the altar, with no way of getting back to it immediately.

_luckily, none of his fears came true.

Despite the fact that the obsidian knife had left its usual spot on the altar, the island seemed fine. Everything was just as it had been a few seconds ago.

He exhaled with visible relief.

'Well... good. I wouldn't want to mess things up too bad for everyone here on the Chained Isles:

Rising to his feet, Sunny looked at the obsidian knife. It seemed. have been cut from a single piece of black stone, with its blade sharpened and polished. There wasn't anything special in how the knife looked. In fact, it seemed a little bit crude, almost primitive.

There was also one little problem.

The knife did not turn into a Memory.

Sunny had expected it to disintegrate into a rain of sparks and enter his core, just like Weaver's Mask had done, or like Shard Memories behaved when raised by a new wielder. Mordret had mentioned something to that effect when speaking about the ivory knife in the Night Temple.

He told Sunny that one had to spill blood on the black altar, to receive a Memory of the blade that rested on its surface. But the obsidian knife did no such thing. It just remained in his hand, as material and palpable as one could imagine. What was even stranger, though...

Was that the knife didn't appear to have a spellweave. It was, without a doubt a magical item. Sunny could feel that it was, even if he didn't know what properties that entailed. However, when he looked beneath the surface of the knife, he didn't see the familiar pattern of ethereal strings weaving themselves around anchoring lights.

What he saw instead was just brilliant radiance, as though the knife was filled to the brim with soul essence. And in that radiance was just a single string... It wasn't the same type of ethereal string, though. It was a... Sunny frowned. A String of Fate. A single String of Fate was somehow placed inside the obsidian knife, folding on itself endlessly, with its two ends connected to create a perfect, neverending circle. Sunny stared at the strange String for a while, and then furrowed his brow. what is that all about?

The Novel will be updated first on this website. Come back and continue reading tomorrow, everyone!

Chapter 474: Truth Be Told

Sunny studied the obsidian knife for a while, and concluded that he had no idea what this thing was supposed to be capable of. It wasn't a Memory, and it didn't have a weave, so neither the Spell nor his own ability to perceive and somewhat understand such things could help him.

The only thing Sunny knew for certain was that someone had plucked a string from the tapestry of Fate and placed it inside the knife, making a circle out of it... for some mysterious purpose.

Everything else was going to have to wait until the next time he heard from Mordret. The lost prince was bound to know more about the obsidian knife, since he seemed to know a lot about the Chained Isles and their past in general.

Now, however, Sunny had to deal with another problem...

He had to explain the disappearance of the knife to the White Feather clan, somehow.

Come morning — or at any moment, really, if someone decided to leave the Dream Realm or entered it in the middle of the night — people would become aware that the knife that no one had been able to lift or move was now gone.

Sunny had no doubt that it was not going to take a long time for them to figure out that it was him who had taken it.

And after that...

'What to do, what to do...'

In the end, he came up with a really crazy idea. Something that he would have never even considered, in normal circumstances. Something that went against his very nature.

...He went and told Master Roan the truth.

Well, the part that had to do with the miraculous coins, to be precise.

Visiting the White Feather compound in the middle of the night was a bit strange, but luckily for him, the older man turned out to be up. He was preparing to leave on a patrol, and so rose early to make the necessary preparations.

After Sunny was done talking, the mighty griffin rider stared at him for a while with a perplexed expression. Then, he asked to take a look at the knife.

Sunny reluctantly handed the obsidian blade over and watched nervously as Master Roan inspected it. He was really hoping that the White Feather clan would not decide to keep it... there were very few things Sunny could do if they did.

Finally, the strapping Master returned the obsidian knife to him and asked curiously:

"So you managed to lift it by using Noctis coins on the altar?"

Sunny nodded.

"Yeah... wait, you know about the coins?"

Master Roan nodded.

"A few have been found here and there on the Isles over the years. It seems that this was the preferred currency people who lived here thousands of years ago used. No one had ever discovered a literal treasure trove of them, though, as you did."

He thought for a bit, and then smiled.

"Actually, I think I have one stashed somewhere. Wait here for a bit, alright?"

With that, Roan disappeared into the stone chateau, and then returned ten or so minutes later, holding a familiar golden coin in his hand.

"Found it! I used to carry it with me a lot before, as a lucky charm. Let's go."

Together, they returned to the altar island.

The first thing Master Roan did was glance at the moon, and then place the coin on the altar. Once again, it gleamed and disappeared, leaving a bewildered expression on the handsome man's face.

"I'll be damned! I just received a bit of soul essence. You were right!"

He shook his head in astonishment.

"To think that these coins had such a use all this time, and no one was the wiser. Good job, Sunless!"

Then, Master Roan hesitated for a few moments, and asked:

"Can you place the knife back on the altar?"

Sunny did as he was asked, and then watched as the mighty griffin rider used all of his formidable power in a vain attempt to lift the obsidian blade off the white surface. When he was done with that futile attempt and stepped back to catch his breath, Sunny simply took hold of the handle and retrieved the knife without any problem.

"Interesting!"

Then came the moment of truth. Sunny tensed as he waited for the older man's decision.

After thinking about it for a while, Master Roan said:

"Well... I don't know if you know this, Sunless, but there is a sacred rule among us Awakened in the Dream Realm. The sanctity of this rule is unassailable and beyond reproach. And that rule is... finders, keepers."

Sunny blinked.

'What?'

The strapping Master grinned:

"So you don't have to worry about either me or Tyris taking that knife from you..."

Then, however, his smile dimmed.

"...Other people, though, might not be as reasonable. Even if no one knows what power this thing has, or if there even is anything special about it, someone might get too excited and act in a regrettable manner. So I'd advise you to put the knife back on the altar, until the time you feel like using it."

Sunny considered his words and had to admit that this, indeed, would be the best decision for now. Master Roan helped him confirm that no one else would be able to take the knife, and carrying it around before venturing into the Nightmare had no benefit.

Summoning the memory of how exactly the obsidian blade had been placed on the altar, he put it in its previous spot and took a step back.

Master Roan nodded.

"Good choice. Please, do tell us if you find out anything about its purpose... at least if it has anything to do with the well-being of the Sanctuary. If need be, we'll compensate you fairly to either take the knife off your hands or lend it for a bit, if that's what you prefer."

Sunny agreed to this condition, since it sounded reasonable.

With that out of the way, the strapping griffin rider looked at him with sparks dancing in his eyes.

"So, uh... what are you going to do now?"

Sunny frowned.

'What a weird question...'

"Go home, take a shower, deal with some real-world business. Why? What are you going to do?"

Master Roan laughed:

"What do you mean, what I am going to do? I am going to go on my patrol, and then I'll go... coin hunting, of course. I suspect that everyone in the Sanctuary is going to be searching for Noctis coins like madmen for quite some time after that discovery of yours. People are going to get really busy..."

Sunny remained silent for a bit, and then said in a very serious tone:

"Good luck, then. Oh, and one thing... if you find a big chest full of them, make your griffin stomp on it a few times before coming closer. Better yet, do that to every chest you encounter in the future. Never trust a chest not to eat you, is what I am trying to say... I sure won't!"

With that, he said goodbye to the handsome Master, placed his hand on the altar, and returned to the real world.

There was a lot he had to do there...

Chapter 475: A Few Things To Do

Some time later Sunny was in his kitchen, eating the breakfast he had just prepared. He was thinking of all the things on his to-do list.

They were, in no particular order selling the soul shards he had brought with him from the Dream Realm, and setting up a stable method to sell more in the future; returning to the Dreamscape to participate in duels on the professional arenas to practice Shadow Dance and feed the Mantle of the Underworld with victories; observing Rain and thinking of a way to deal with that whole situation; learning how to properly fight with a spear; visiting Neph; writing a report about the Noctis coins for Teacher Julius.

There were probably more things he had to do, but was forgetting. But he already had enough on his plate.

Finishing the breakfast and staring toward the door of the guest bedroom, where Effie still slept while her spirit wandered the Dream Realm, he shook his head and went out to sit on the porch as he drank some delicious tea.

It was early morning. Sunny enjoyed the pleasant view of the terrace district, watched as Rain walked to the public transport hub on her way to school, and then activated his communicator.

He was going to start with the simplest of tasks.

Navigating to the market section of the network, he habitually imputed his identification number to access the Awakened section of it. Sunny had browsed the wares there before, even if back then he barely had enough money to buy anything.

Today, however, things were different Today, he was approaching the network as a seller, not as a buyer.

Sunny entered 'soul shards' as the keywords and stared at the listings, appreciating the number of zeroes in their prices. It seemed as though the value of shards was not uniform... of course, the higher Rank shards cost

much more. But people, strangely, also seemed to care about what Nightmare Creature the crystal came from, and how it had been defeated.

'What the hell?

Apparently, there were _ collectors among the wealthy mundane humans who were very interested in this sort of thing. Some superstitious Awakened also believed, for some reason, that absorbing "bad" shards would be detrimental to the purity of their souls.

Weirdos.:

Sunny didn't know a lot of things, but one thing he did know was that there was not a single Awakened out there with a pure soul. Even the best of them were murderers by nature, and their hearts were painted black by the nightmares they had experienced.

Not to mention that there were no bad or good soul shards. They were all pretty much the same, coming from terrible monsters and earned through bloodshed. Anyway, that was something he was going to consider when creating his own listing. After getting the gist of the pricing, Sunny opened the form to create his own digital shop. Without thinking too much, he named it "Brilliant Emporium and went on to fill out the entire form. Then, it came the time to put his soul shards into the auction. Sunny wrote simply:

'Four soul shards coming from a Fallen Devil, Mordant Mimic. The creature was killed and eaten by the proprietor of the Brilliant Emporium himself. Before that, the Mordant Mimic had been pretending to be a treasure chest and devouring those lured by the promise of treasure. In the end, it bit off more than it could chew.'

Satisfied with that, he finalized the listing and stared at it for a bit as if expecting someone to bid instantly. However nothing of the sort happened. With a sigh, Sunny deactivated the communicator and went back inside. 'Soon... I will be rich soon....

It took several days for all four of his soul shard to sell. After that, Sunny had to arrange secure delivery, which was somewhat of a headache on its

own. Overall, the process took too much time from his already packed schedule.

He also felt that he was missing some crucial knowledge on how to make his business really boom. Even though the product he was trying to sell was first class — there was not a lot of Fallen Rank soul shard out there, compared to Dormant and Awakened ones—the bidding had not really taken off. He did make a sizable amount of money, but not as sizable as it could have been.

Still, it was enough to purchase a couple of cheap lower Rank Memories. Sunny simply looked for the most useless ones, which no one else would ever want to buy, and made the minimum offer. Whoever it was selling them must have been happy beyond belief to finally be rid of these things.

Sunny was going to feed the Memories to Saint immediately after receiving them, but before that, he spent a lot of time training with the Cruel Sight in his underground dojo.

He had a solid understanding of how to use a short sword, but a spear was an alien beast to him. Even though Sunny knew the basic rules of combat technique and could perform somewhat effectively while wielding any weapon, he was far, far away from mastering them.

How fortunate it was then, that he had a renowned spear master — Raised by Wolves herself — crashing in his guest bedroom.

Granted, she couldn't really spar with him due to her condition. But he had Saint for that.

In the end, the three of them spent a lot of time in his basement. Effie was observing and explaining to him what to do, how to do it and most importantly, what not to do. Saint served as his opponent and the mighty enemy to polish his nascent skill against. And Sunny_ Sunny found himself once again in the role of a willing punching bag.

It was just like in that week they had spent in the hidden chamber of the ruined cathedral in the Dark City. Sunny even got nostalgic, remembering

how cozy and nice things had been back then.

Now, however things were much better. Not only was there an unlimited amount of delicious food they could eat during the breaks in his training, there were even medicine and ice baths to ease the pain in his bruised and beaten body.

Training with Saint was really effective, but she really didn't know how to pull her punches! Just like that a few days passed. And then, something that Sunny had been dreading for a while finally, and inevitably, happened....It was time to accompany Kai to the premier of the Song of Light and Darkness.

The Novel will be updated first on this website. Come back and continue reading tomorrow, everyone!

Chapter 476: A Song of Light and Darkness

Some time later, Sunny was pondering his life choices while sitting in the back row of a crowded theater. The lights were already off, which obviously meant nothing to him. People seemed to be really excited to see the movie, though... especially Effie, who was to his side, munching on something called popcorn and staring at the screen.

In the darkness, somber music started to play, reverberating through the entire space and making the audience shiver. Effie suddenly jabbed her elbow into his ribs.

"Do you know who is the composer for this thing? It's Griffin! I don't know how they managed to get him, but he scored the entire movie. Such an honor! Can you believe it?"

Sunny had no idea who this Griffin guy was, but judging by Effie's reaction, he was someone famous. Massaging his ribs with a grimace, Sunny offered a stifled answer:

"I can."

On the screen, the interior of a spacious and beautifully lit room appeared. A small girl with silver hair was playing on a carpet, while a handsome man with dark circles under his eyes was shown studying a map.

'What the hell...'

Was that supposed to be Nephis? If so, her hair should have been black. It only turned silver after her First Nightmare.

Effie giggled.

"So cute!"

The girl, meanwhile, approached the table and reached to touch the strange sword that lay on it. The blade of the sword was short and misshapen, as

though shattered a long time ago.

Before the girl could cut herself, though, the man lifted the sword and brought it out of her reach.

"This is not a toy, Nephis!"

Sunny palmed his face and grimaced.

"But, daddy... why is your sword broken?"

The man smiled.

"So what if it is broken? It is still sharp."

Then, he put his hand on the girl's shoulder and looked at her with a very serious expression:

"One day you will wield a sword too, darling. When you do, remember one thing: we, Awakened, only raise arms to protect humanity. As long as we don't give up, no matter how dire the situation is, there will be hope. Just like this sword, humanity is more resilient than it seems!"

Sunny tilted his head.

'Wait, this doesn't even make sense...'

The scene, however, was already over. The screen turned black for a few moments, and the movie transitioned into the future. Nephis — now a languid jade beauty with a slim waist, generous figure, long eyelashes, and mesmerizing grey eyes — was entering the Academy. What followed was a long training montage showing her defeating every other Sleeper there with a training sword, all the while offering words of wisdom.

Like "never give up hope", or "remember your duty", or "we are humans!".

The propaganda was so tacky and laid so thick Sunny could help but cringe

The only person the jade beauty couldn't defeat was a handsome young man with masculine features, broad shoulders, and a noble bearing... Han Li Caster.

'Oh, no. Oh, no...'

Sunny should have guessed by the invitation Kai had given him, but the director of the movie was obviously hinting at the nascent romantic feelings between the two. Their conversations in the Academy seemed to be about swordsmanship, but were also somehow deeply flirtatious.

The actors had mad chemistry together.

He wanted to vomit, but the audience was clearly enthralled by the two leads.

Sunny didn't dwell on this preposterous thing for long, though... because right about then, his own character was introduced.

'What he Spell is this?!'

The actor hired to play him... was a literal child! It was a teenage boy of about thirteen years of age, with a mischievous grin and a face that, for lack of better words, simply begged to be punched. Worse than that, he was shown as extremely uneducated, clumsy, and naive.

In short... Sunny was the comic relief!

He turned to Effie in outrage, only to see her laughing silently.

"Oh, man... who's the casting director for this movie, I need to send them flowers!"

Even his shadows were laughing. Both of them!

Sunny gritted his teeth, promised to exact revenge on Kai and Effie for making him endure this, and turned back to the screen.

Finally, Nephis entered the Dream Realm and found herself on the Forgotten Shore. The coral labyrinth and the dark sea were recreated with such detail that he couldn't help but shiver.

'Well... they did their research, at least!'

The audience was holding their breaths during Nephis's journey to the Dark City. The terrifying nature of the dark tides and the deadly battles with Awakened Nightmare Creatures populating the Labyrinth created a truly tense, suffocating atmosphere.

Of course, everyone knew that the main character was not going to die in the first half of the movie. But that's where Sunny — as well as Cassie — came into play. Just as he had expected, the movie showed them as a burden that had to be carried by Nephis on her heroic journey. But since very few people knew who Sunny was, his fate was uncertain.

Nephis was bound to survive, but what about her friends?

And, thanks to his character, there were also moments of pleasant levity amidst all the tension. A few times, the whole audience exploded with laughter after Sunny on the screen did something especially stupid or said something really outrageous.

He had also slowly developed a catchphrase. It was... "Are you crazy?!"

That not only allowed the audience to chuckle, but also gave Nephis the opportunity to educate her worthless follower, thus naturally delivering a lot of necessary exposition.

The real Sunny wasn't amused, though. Because they weren't laughing with him... they were laughing at him.

'Idiots! What do you even know?'

They didn't know anything...

Since no one really knew what the three of them had gone through on their way to the Dark City, the writer simply came up with some dire dangers for

Nephis to overcome.

Eventually, though, they made it to the ancient city, and met Effie.

Effie was played by a very tall, athletic, and attractive actress.

...The way she played her, though, was a sight to behold. Basically, the actress went out of her way to portray the huntress as a charismatic, but not very bright savage who was all brawn and no brain. All she knew how to do was fight, eat, and break things.

Sunny turned to Effie and grinned, full of malice and gloating.

This was the first time he had ever seen the boisterous young woman... completely mortified.

"Casting director, you say? I think I'll send them flowers, too."

Chapter 477: Standing Ovation | Shadow Slave

After Nephis reached the Dark City and the huntress was introduced, both Sunny and Effie watched the rest of the movie with bleak expressions.

The second act took place in the outer settlement, and was dedicated to Neph's heroic attempts to protect and inspire the young men and women trapped there. There were a lot of impassioned speeches, blood-chilling expeditions into the Dark City, and tense altercations with Gunlaug's forces.

There were also a lot of shenanigans from young Sunny, to the delight of the audience. At some point, people started to scream "Are you crazy?!" along with him. And a bit later, there was a sort of comical moment of growth for the character, when he asked "...Am I crazy?" instead and went along with Nephis without offering his usual critique, which was met with cheers.

...Most of this part of the movie, though, was dedicated to the genuine respect and camaraderie that blossomed between Nephis and Caster in this dire time. With the handsome male lead as her right hand, Changing Star successfully united the people of the outer settlement, reminded them what it meant to be humans, and challenged Gunlaug to save boisterous Effie from unjust imprisonment.

The duel itself was choreographed somewhat well, even if it had nothing to do with the real thing. The moves both the radiant heroine and the cruel tyrant used were flashy and dramatic, and expressed the mood well, but anyone trying to actually fight like that would probably risk having their enemy die of laughter.

The third act showed the siege of the Crimson Spire, the heroic stand of the warriors of the first line and Effie, Kai's battle in the skies with the Spire Messengers, and Neph and Caster fighting back to back, slaying dozens and dozens of Nightmare Creatures together.

The audience seemed to have forgotten to breathe, and even Sunny had to admit that the battle scene was filmed especially well, showcasing the chaos, horror, and terrible toll of human lives that such a massacre was bound to reap. Many side characters that people had already grown to love died heroically, and he even heard a few sobs coming from the darkness.

Enhanced by the beautiful music, the atmosphere was not tragic, though. On the contrary, it was triumphant and exalted, as if to die in this way was the highest honor a human could receive.

A bit uncomfortable, Sunny shifted in his seat.

'That Griffin guy really knows how to make a tune...'

When the situation was the most desperate, with the dark water rising and threatening to drown all the surviving warriors, a sudden change happened. The sea suddenly retreated, and the monsters started to fall to the ground. Caster, covered in blood and wounds, looked at Nephis and whispered:

"My Lady! The sun..."

Indeed, the sun had suddenly turned menacingly red, its light eradicating the remaining Nightmare Creatures and assaulting the humans. For the first time in the entire movie, an uncertain and desperate expression appeared on Changing Star's face.

Salvation came from someone who the audience would have never expected to see do something so profound — a clear ringing of the bell resounded in the air, and the small figure of clumsy, useless Sunny could be seen near the tower, waving his hand in the air.

The survivors rushed toward the Crimson Spire and entered inside.

There, Nephis looked up, and then turned to Sunny.

"Someone has to stall the Terror so that everyone could escape. I will do battle with that nightmare, but there's an important task you must complete. Lead all these people to the Gateway!"

Sunny on the screen looked at Changing Star with fear:

"Lady Nephis... are you crazy? I am just a clumsy kid from the outskirts. How can you entrust something so important to someone like me?"

Sunny in the real world suppressed an infuriated groan. People in the audience, though, were rather emotional:

"You can do it, Sunny!"

"You got this, kid!"

"You're a great scout, don't sell yourself short!"

On the screen, the beautiful actress playing Nephis looked down on the comical, slightly pathetic boy in front of her and put her hand on his shoulder.

"We, Awakened, must rise to the occasion to protect humanity. As long as we don't give up, no matter how dire the situation is, there will be hope. I believe in you, Sunny. You are capable of much more than you think!"

With that, she left the survivors and went off to fight the Terror, while Sunny guided everyone to the Gateway. And somewhere in the process, Caster left the group to aid Changing Star in battle.

The last scenes of the movie cut between the hundred survivors fighting their way to the Gateway and the tragic duo battling the terrifying creature at the top of the Spire.

Many people in the audience were crying, knowing full well that neither of them was going to return to the real world.

In the end, Caster heroically sacrificed himself to protect Nephis, breaking the hearts of so many viewers. The survivors found the Gateway and escaped seconds before it was destroyed.

The last shot showed bloodied Neph walking out of the tower, holding a broken sword in her hand.

As she gazed at the Forgotten Shore, a lone tear rolled down her cheek.

"As long as we don't give up... there is hope."

The screen turned black, and in the next moment, the audience exploded with applause.

Sunny stared at all those people, many of them applauding with tears in their eyes, with a strange expression on his face.

'Did they... actually like that crap?'

He turned to Effie, lingered for a moment, and asked:

"Uh... did you like it?"

The former huntress gave him a long look.

Then, she said:

"What I am, an idiot? Of course I didn't like it. It's such a piece of crap!"

Sunny exhaled with relief.

At least there was one other sane person in this theater...

Chapter 478: Credit Where Credit Is Due

After the movie was over, Kai appeared to deafening applause and gave a short speech, congratulating the director and the crew of the movie and then inviting them on the stage for a short Q&A.

Sunny stared at the director of this travesty, seriously considering silently assassinating him for a few moments. Then, he glanced at Effie, who — judging by her face — was thinking the same.

He lingered for a few moments, then asked:

"What do you want to do?"

The young woman inhaled deeply, turned to him, and smiled.

"...I am hungry. Let's go eat."

Together, they snuck out of the screening hall and went to find the theater's restaurant.

There were a lot of people there who, just like them, had decided to skip the PR portion of the event and were now enjoying food and drinks, discussing the movie with lively expressions. Sunny and Effie got themselves something to eat and sat at an empty table, then grew quiet for a while. Each was preoccupied with their own thoughts.

Now that Sunny had a little time to digest the movie, his anger subsided a bit. In fact, he was even happy.

Sure, the way he was portrayed in the story was as far from the truth as it could have been, and more than a little bit humiliating. But... in a way, this was exactly what he needed.

Now that Nephis had become his master, he didn't have to hide his strength and True Name that much. But he still preferred to remain in the shadows — not only because there was a possibility of becoming masterless again,

but also because it was the best way to be in the world so full of hidden dangers and powerful enemies.

Being renowned would make a lot of things difficult for him, and make every battle he fought after that harder. After all, there was no better advantage than being underestimated by the enemy.

From that point of view, the ridiculous way in which he was portrayed in the movie was a blessing. It made the possibility of anyone thinking highly of him that much lower. Of course, not everyone was going to watch that travesty, but many would, and their opinion was going to spread.

Who would believe that a Changing Star's bumbling sidekick was, in fact, one of the most dangerous Awakened alive, and thus consider him as a serious threat?

...Pretty much no one.

So, in fact, the director of the Song of Light and Darkness unintentionally made him a favor.

Satisfied with that conclusion, Sunny looked around. He saw several people looking at Effie with stunned expressions, clearly gathering their courage to come and introduce themselves. But no one had, yet.

He could hear their whispers, though:

"Look! It's her, Raised by Wolves!"

"Oh, my!"

"I heard about her situation, but to actually see... She is so brave!"

Effie herself was strangely quiet. She ignored the whispers, then looked at him and asked:

"Hey, Sunny. Can I ask you something?"

Sensing that this was not going to be a simple question, he tensed a little, and then said:

"Sure. What is it?"

Effie hesitated for a few moments, then lowered her voice, so that no one would be able to overhear:

"Did Caster really leave to help Nephis?"

'Ah...'

Sunny stared at his friend for a bit, then shook his head.

"...No. He left to make sure that she dies."

Effie inhaled deeply.

"...I see."

She didn't continue that conversation, as though his answer confirmed something that she had already suspected.

Well... despite her often boorish demeanor and the way she was portrayed in the movie, Effie was anything but stupid. In fact, she was extremely intelligent, cool-headed, and cunning — otherwise, she would have never survived for three long years alone on the streets of the Dark City.

It was only natural for her to have suspicions, considering how much she knew.

Luckily, Effie did not ask anything else.

...Mostly because of a strange man who entered the restaurant, looked around, noticed their table, and walked over with gleaming eyes.

'Oh no... another fan of Raised by Wolves...'

The man stopped in front of them, glanced at Effie, and then turned to Sunny with an awed expression:

"A... are you Awakened Sunless?"

Sunny blinked.

'What?'

"Uh... yes?"

A bright smile appeared on the man's face.

"Oh my! Oh, goodness! It is such an honor! I am such a huge fan of yours!"

'What is happening?!'

Sunny stared at the beaming man, trying to comprehend what he was saying. Misjudging his expression, the man hurriedly said:

"Oh, sorry! I was so nervous that I forgot to introduce myself. I am a writer... in fact, it was I who wrote the screenplay for A Song of Light and Darkness. And it's all... all thanks to you!"

Effie stared at Sunny with an expression that didn't promise him anything good and asked in a sweet voice:

"Oh? All thanks to him, really? How come?"

'...I'm in trouble!'

The man's smile grew even wider.

"Exploration Report on the Forgotten Shore! Ah, it is such a brilliant piece of academic work. I based most of my research on your profound work, Awakened Sunless! Everyone on the crew and everyone in the cast read it at least once. I even insisted on giving you the co-writer credit, but sadly, it was impossible... you know, due to you not being a member of the

screenwriter's guild. But fret not! I'll let everyone know that if it weren't for you, this movie wouldn't exist!"

Sunny stared at the man with wide eyes, and then said in a weak voice:

"Please, don't..."

But it was of no use.

"Ah, you are so humble! So modest! Well, of course, what else would I expect from a researcher as talented as you? But it wouldn't be right for me to receive all the praise... no, people must know..."

He looked at the restaurant and proclaimed, not even trying to keep his voice down:

"...that it is you, Awakened Sunless, who they must thank for being able to enjoy our wonderful film!"

Sunny looked at the floor.

'I guess I am going to have to kill Kai. Or wait, no. Actually, that probably makes us even after the whole Mongrel disaster...'

Chapter 479: Delegation | Shadow Slave

Luckily for Sunny, Kai was finished with his business soon, and they were able to leave the theater for a more private space.

...Otherwise, there might have been civilian casualties at the premier of the Song of Light of Darkness. After that damn writer had announced Sunny's identity to everyone in the restaurant, the amount of people asking him to say "Are you crazy?!" to their faces almost pushed him to the brink.

In any case, soon he found himself in a sophisticated lounge in the company of Effie, Kai, and Aiko. The petite girl looked very sharp in a fashionable business suit and radiated a sense of cold professionalism that made people think twice before approaching laidback and friendly Kai... which, Sunny supposed, was a big part of being an idol's manager.

When they were seated, the idol in question gave them a guilty look.

"Well... uh... it wasn't that bad, was it?"

Effie smiled at him, and said sweetly:

"Sure, sure! But also, the only reason you're still alive is that it would be a chore to clean the blood of my wheelchair."

Kai chuckled nervously and glanced at Sunny:

"What about you?"

Sunny shrugged.

"I don't mind. Actually, I am happy to be portrayed as a bumbling fool."

The charming archer blinked.

"Really?"

Sunny gave him a serious nod.

"Of course! It's easier to fool people who think that you're the fool. So... I don't mind."

Kai looked away in embarrassment.

"Anyway... you don't have to worry too much, really. These types of films are usually made to boost public morale. No one is really going to take them seriously. Even mundane people understand the difference between reality and fiction when it comes to the Awakened."

Sunny laughed.

"Sure. When they want to."

He was a mundane person for most of his life too, after all. And even though he grew up in the outskirts, he used to consume cheap entertainment just like everyone else in the waking world. Yes, he knew how to recognize propaganda and what to not take seriously, but at the same time, many things that had nothing to do with the truth found their way into his mind and silently became beliefs.

That was how well-engineered falsehoods worked.

They spent some time chatting and joking about especially ridiculous moments in the movie, and at the right moment, Sunny said:

"By the way... I talked to Cassie. She's in. But we'll need to do it before winter, so minus one month for preparations."

Effie smiled.

"Good news! I'll start packing, then. I am south of Bastion right now, so it will take me... two, three months to get to the Chained Isles? Unless one of you knows a friendly local Saint."

Sunny thought about Saint Tyris, and remind silent.

No, that woman frightened him too much to ask for a favor. He wondered how Master Jet had managed to convince her, in the first place.

Kai nodded.

"We can meet in Bastion and travel north together. It will be safer."

Aiko, meanwhile, was looking at them with a confused expression on her delicate face.

"Travel north? Do it before winter? What are you talking about?"

A guilty expression suddenly appeared on the charming archer's face.

"That... uh... I haven't mentioned it before. But, basically, I am going to join Sunny, Effie, and Cassie to... to challenge the Second Nightmare."

Aiko stared at him with a shocked expression.

"Not to steal from Sunny, but... are you crazy?! Have you told the agency?"

Kai smiled weakly.

"...No? I was hoping that you will tell them, actually. They'll listen to you! Isn't it a good thing, really? For public relations. Plus, as a Master, I won't have to visit the Dream Realm every day."

The petite girl scoffed.

"If you survive!"

Then, she glanced at Sunny and Effie, and shook her head.

"Ah, who am I kidding... I guess I'll be jobless again, soon. You guys have fun for a bit, I'll go get a drink."

With that, she rose and went toward the bar.

Sunny thought for a bit, then rose, too.

"I'll go keep her company."

Kai gave him a thankful smile.

"I appreciate it."

'What does he think I am going to do?'

Sunny gave his friend a confused look, then followed Aiko.

Of course, he wasn't doing it out of consideration. In fact, he wanted to talk to her about something in private.

When he approached the bar and stood near the petite girl, she gave him a dirty look.

"Whatever it is, no. Hell no..."

Sunny blinked.

"What do you mean?"

Aiko smiled crookedly.

"I know that look of yours. The last time you looked at me like that, Stev and I almost ended up as the Blood Lord bait. What, do you want me to join your suicide crusade?"

He shook his head.

"No, no. Nothing of the sort. In fact, it's about your job..."

The petite girl raised an eyebrow.

"Oh?"

Sunny nodded.

"Well, since there's a possibility of you losing a part of your income, and Kai tells me that you are really good at managing stuff... how would you like to help me manage a blossoming new business?"

Aiko looked at him with a dubious expression.

"Are you opening an assassination agency?"

He almost choked.

"What? What made you think that? No, I just found a way to move items between the real world and the Dream Realm. My dream, if you need to know, is to become the proprietor of an elite Memory store...."

The petite girl stared at him with wide eyes.

"...Really?"

Sunny frowned.

"Yes, really! Why, can't I have a dream? Just imagine, sitting safely in a fashionably decorated store without having to risk my skin in the Dream Realm, and have tons of money simply flow into my hands. That's the stuff dreams are made of, is it not?"

Aiko shook her head with a bewildered expression on her face.

"I guess?"

Sunny smiled.

"You understand! The others might think that it's silly, but I know you wouldn't, as a former business owner yourself. Anyway, I won't have a large enough arsenal of Memories for a while, but I can start creating a reputation for the store already. A brand name, or whatever it's called. So I just sold four Fallen soul shards on the network, from a devil I killed... and ate. But for some reason, that bastard's shards did not fetch a really good price..."

Aiko looked at him with a frown.

"Well... what category of the vendor license did you apply for? Who's your appraiser? What's your feature strategy? SEO approach? Pool of endorsements?"

He remained silent for a bit, then said:

"...You see, you said a lot of words, and most of them even sound familiar, but I have no idea what you mean."

'What the hell was she talking about? What's a SEO? Are there different licenses? Wait, do I even need a license? Don't tell me that I need to pay taxes, too...'

The petite girl closed her eyes for a moment.

"None? You did none of these things?"

Sunny nodded.

"It's a miracle that you even managed to sell those shards!"

He smiled.

"That's why I need someone smart and resourceful like you to help me! For te... five percent commission of every sale. Just think about it. How many Awakened out there can bring soul shards to the real world, and bring spices to the Dream Realm? We'll be rich in no time!"

Aiko sighed and remained silent for a bit.

Then, she said:

"That is a high-risk business venture that wholly depends on two unpredictable factors — you staying alive and you continuously hunting down Nightmare Creatures, which are usually in contradiction to each other. So in normal circumstances, I would have said no. But... it is you, I guess. Plus, you have a good relationship with all three of the newest Named Awakened, as well as a lot of prestige as a member of Changing Star's cohort. And now even some pop culture fame..."

Aiko shrugged, thought for a long while, and then said categorically:

"Ten percent."

Sunny grinned and offered her his hand for a handshake.

"Perfect! Welcome aboard Sunny's Brilliant Emporium!"

The petite girl stared at him in shock.

"Wait... you actually named the store Brilliant Emporium?! Can the naming be changed?!"

He shook his head.

"No. It's non-negotiable. But what's wrong with that name? It's a great name! I think that it's... you know... brilliant..."

Chapter 480: Busy Schedule | Shadow Slave

After that night, Sunny became really busy.

'Delegating... that's the secret of success.'

That was his thought after Aiko joined the Brilliant Emporium as a manager. With her help, he went through all the necessary paperwork to make his improvised network store seem legit. Sunny noticed the difference right after listing the soul shards he had gathered from the inhabitants of the Sanctuary for sale. Not only did they get purchased much faster, but the price was also pleasantly higher than expected.

He also didn't need to spend a lot of his severely lacking time on managing sales, delivery, and purchases. Aiko streamlined the process and created a simple and efficient system where he handed her the inventory and the updated information on what items the Awakened wanted to receive from him in the Dream Realm, and she did the rest.

While its volume of sales was not overwhelming, the Brilliant Emporium started functioning as a real business with a constant level of activity and a slowly growing client base. Sunny just had to collect the money and spend it on low-tier Memories to feed to Saint.

Well, and remain alive while getting the soul shards, of course.

Sadly, despite how appreciative of the concept of delegating he became, this was the only part of his busy life that he could entrust to someone else. All the other things he had to do were either too personal, or too secretive to recruit anyone to help.

No one was going to do his research for him, so Sunny had to spend time writing reports, bringing them to Teacher Julius, and working with the old man to make them worthy of being rewarded with contribution points. Nothing had brought him quite as much as the Forgotten Shore report had, but the points were slowly accumulating.

Similarly, now that Cassie was gone on a long expedition, he was the only one of Neph's friends — of which there were only two, really — who could visit her. That was not a burden, but took away some of his time nevertheless.

He also kept an eye on the runes describing her status, and saw the number of soul fragments in her possession increase at a frightening speed almost every day. Sunny didn't know where Nephis was and what she was doing, what kinds of enemies she was fighting, but they must have been as powerful as they were ample in numbers.

He had to keep up.

Now that he had received a vast boost to his power through sacrificing the miraculous coins to the white altar in the Sanctuary of Noctis, less than four hundred fragments stood between him and being able to create a third core.

That meant that he had to continue venturing into the wilderness of the Chained Isles to hunt down Nightmare Creatures. Armed with the Cruel Sight and the ability to infuse its blade with either invisible soul damage or radiant divine flame, he was now able to go further than he had before, and challenge creatures that previously he chose to avoid.

Their deaths rewarded him with shadow fragments, while their bodies gifted him soul shards that were then sold and converted into Memories, and through those, into shadow fragments as well, this time for Saint to consume. It was a virtuous, but exhausting and wildly dangerous cycle.

And as if the pressure of having to keep up with Changing Star wasn't enough, he also had to continue training, both with the spear — with the help of Effie and his taciturn demon — and without it, to practice Shadow Dance.

That second task, however, had turned out to be much harder than Sunny expected.

Before plunging back into the Dreamscape, he decided to be careful and check what the situation with Mongrel was. A quick search on the network

could tell him if everyone had forgotten about the masked swordsmen or not.

And as it turned out... they did not.

To Sunny's dismay, he found out that in the month of his absence, the people infatuated with Mongrel had not only persisted in their excitement, but also brought it to a whole new, truly ridiculous level.

All of them were flooding the network with theories and discussions, and countless individuals — even those who missed out on the initial sensation — were waiting with bated breaths for one glorious moment.

The return of Lord Mongrel!

With each day that passed, their anticipation only grew stronger.

No matter how discrete Sunny could be, once he appeared in the Dreamscape, it was going to create too much noise and attract too much attention.

'Damn it all! What a disaster!'

He was on verge of pulling his hair out in despair. It was worth remembering that the persona of Mongrel — oh irony! — had been created to help him stay anonymous, potentially in order to safely glean secrets about the sovereigns in the future.

What a joke it was, that the faceless phantom he created ended up being much more famous and recognizable than its creator.

In any case, the situation was seriously messing up Sunny's plans. He simply couldn't use Dreamscape, which caused his progress with Shadow Dance — and the Mantle of the Underworld — to stall.

And if that wasn't enough, there was another unexpected problem he encountered. That one wasn't as inconvenient and pernicious, but made him worry a lot, for whatever reason.

It was that Sunny had not heard from Mordret again after returning from the Ivory Tower.

Despite the fact that several weeks had passed, the lost prince remained gone. Sunny's head, once again, had only one voice resounding in it — his own. Usually, that would have been a good sign, but Mordret's absence made Sunny tense and full of vaguely bad premonitions.

What could have happened to his mysterious helper? Was he simply unable to establish contact outside of the Sky Below and the Ivory Island, or had something happened to him?

There was no answer.

Sunny even took out the mirror shard from the Covetous Coffers and smeared a few drops of blood on it, to no result whatsoever. The piece of mirror remained the same — absolutely dark and refusing to reflect anything.

It was after one of these fruitless attempts that Sunny left Effie to enjoy the dinner he had cooked for them by herself and went out to sit on the porch in a dark mood.

It was early evening, and shadows were slowly growing longer and deeper. Maybe because of his exhaustion, or maybe because of how used he was to being safe in his home, but Sunny got consumed by thoughts and lost track of his surroundings... something that rarely happened.

...That was why he was so shocked to hear someone's voice just a few meters away.

"...What are you staring at?"

Sunny blinked a few times, then focused his sight on the person who had addressed him.

In front of him, at a bit of distance, just between the sidewalk and the path leading to his porch, stood a fourteen-year-old girl in a school uniform, with

black hair and dark eyes... and a very unamused expression on her pale face.

Sunny's chest grew cold.

'Crap!'

It was Rain.

Looking right at Sunny, she sighed and repeated:

"I said what are you staring at... brat?"

The Novel will be updated first on this website. Come back and continue reading tomorrow, everyone!

Chapter 481: First Meeting | Shadow Slave

'What is she doing here?! Why is she talking to me?'

<o>,m Although Sunny was panicking on the inside, none of the emotions reflected on his face. Armed with the extensive experience of deceit, manipulation, and facing terrifying Nightmare Creatures in melee, he kept a straight face, threw a dark look at Rain, and calmly said:</o>

"I am not staring at anything. And who are you calling a brat, you brat? Respect your elders!"

The girl scoffed.

"What elders? You're obviously younger than me!"

Sunny opened his eyes wide in outrage.

'...Ouch.'

He knew that he looked younger than his age, but to be mistaken for a middle schooler... that was just too much!

It was getting dark, so maybe that was the reason for her mistake.

Rain, meanwhile, was not done speaking:

"And you were definitely staring at me, with a very nasty expression. I almost tripped! Didn't your parents teach you not to stare?"

Sunny opened his mouth, then closed it again. Then opened it once more.

"First of all, I am eighteen. Second, I was just zoning out and thinking about stuff... adult stuff that a youngster like you would not even understand! And lastly, my parents taught me all they needed to teach me, but what do they have to do with any of this? They're not here!"

Rain mockingly raised an eyebrow.

"Oh yeah? You live in this big house all alone?"

Sunny furrowed his brow.

"Not only do I live in this house alone, I also own it!"

...But right at that moment, Effie suddenly shouted from inside:

"Sunny! Come eat, dinner is getting cold!"

He froze, then felt the tips of his ears growing hot.

'Damn it, Effie!'

"Uh... that's a guest of mine. She's staying over... for reasons."

Rain stared at him for a few moments with a funny expression on her face, then asked:

"Your name is Sunny?"

Sunny shrugged, trying to appear as indifferent as possible.

"Sure. Why?"

She suddenly laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"No, no! It's just... my mom calls me Rainy. What a coincidence!"

He relaxed.

'Oh... for a moment, I was afraid that she remembers me. But it doesn't seem that way. Good. That is good...'

Was he a little bit disappointed?

Sunny took out his communicator, pressed a button on it, and threw an etched chip that slid from the slick device to Rain.

She was in process of asking another question:

"Oh, and by the way, I often see you meandering on the porch and skipping school... are you a delinquent or wh..."

Then, she caught the chip and stared at it in confusion.

"Uh... what's this?"

Sunny smiled with a corner of his mouth.

"Can't you see? That's a government-issued citizenship chip. Now how would I have one if I wasn't of legal age?"

Rain looked at the chip, then grew even paler than usual.

"You, you really are eighteen?"

She was so mortified that she even used the proper honorifics.

Sunny laughed.

"Of course I am! As a respectable adult, I never lie. I am the most honest person in the world, really."

The girl seemed like she was currently wishing to sink into the earth.

"Oh... I am so s—sorry, then. I didn't think..."

As a child that grew up in a good family, she was most likely taught to be very polite to elders, so this situation was more or less a nightmare. Sunny himself had never associated with types of people who were particular about etiquette, but from what he had seen in Rain's school, among her ilk, social hierarchy and proper rituals were all the rage.

Luckily, Effie decided to appear at that very moment to put an end to the awkward situation. Opening the door, she rolled her wheelchair onto the porch while saying angrily:

"Listen, doofus, are you going to eat or not? Because if not, I'll eat your portion too, you know..."

Then, she stopped and stared at Rain, then at Sunny. After a few moments, she asked:

"Who's your friend?"

Sunny rubbed his face.

"Eat as much as you want. And this girl lives in the neighborhood. She was just passing by."

Rain nodded.

"Nice to meet you, ma'am. I, uh... am very sorry. I was just on my way home from school, and made a mistake. You see, what has happened..."

Effie grinned, then gestured for her to stop talking.

"Let me guess... this one right here was zoning out with a nasty expression on his face, and then looked at you and said something wildly inappropriate?"

Rain blinked a couple of times, then said:

"Yes! I mean, no... he didn't say anything. It was me, I said something inappropriate!"

The former huntress shook her head.

"Then you're lucky! Sunny here is a bit special. One of a kind! The things that sometimes come out of his mouth..."

Sunny stared at her in outrage and hissed:

"The things that come out of my mouth?! You're the one to talk!"

She sighed, then looked at Rain with a hurt expression on her face:

"You see how he bullies me? Ah, that's no way to treat a guest, Sunny. So ungracious! What will this nice neighborhood kid even think..."

Rain energetically shook her head.

"No, no! I won't think anything. I... have to go home, actually. It's been nice meeting you!"

With that, she hurriedly turned around and made a step to walk away.

Effie raised her voice a little:

"Bye! Nice meeting you, too! If you feel guilty about the misunderstanding, you can stop by any time! With food! All will be forgiven!"

Sunny stared at her with wide eyes, not quite believing what he was hearing. Finally, when Rain's figure disappeared behind the green fence, Effie turned to him and smiled.

"...It's almost like there's a factory somewhere in the city releasing whole batches of tiny, pale, bony teenagers. That girl is almost as pale as you, Sunny! I can't believe it..."

With that, she shook her head, turned her wheelchair, and went back inside to continue her dinner.

Leaving Sunny alone, flabbergasted and trying to determine if he was currently awake.

'...What was that? What just happened?'

Of all the countless scenarios he had in his head of how his first meeting with Rain would go...

This was definitely not one of them!

The Novel will be updated first on this website. Come back and continue reading tomorrow, everyone!

Chapter 482: Peace Offering | Shadow Slave

Sunny was too shaken by what had just happened to do anything else today. So, he just went down to the basement, entered the Dream Realm, and remained in his small room in the Sanctuary instead of going out to fight Nightmare Creatures.

There, he just slept peacefully for the entire night.

This was a very strange way to act for Sunny, but many Awakened did just that every day. Unless their Citadel was under attack — which happened frequently in most parts of the Dream Realm — or they were assigned a certain duty, people just remained in their quarters, slept, and returned to the real world without throwing themselves into any kind of danger.

Others performed various tasks to earn a livelihood in the Citadel, all the while staying safe behind its walls. Few frequently ventured outside and challenged the wilderness of the Dream Realm.

And who could blame them?

Most people were made Awakened against their will, after all. It was the Spell that wanted humans to risk their lives, go through deadly trials and endure terrible suffering, not people themselves. So there was nothing wrong with a person who wanted to stay as safe as possible, for as long as possible.

If anything, it was Sunny who behaved abnormally.

In any case, he felt refreshed and more balanced when he returned to the real world in the morning. A good night of sleep helped him put his unexpected encounter with Rain in perspective.

Yes, it was an unfortunate mistake on his part, and yes, the fact that she now knew his face and name was less than ideal. But truly, nothing too bad had happened. Rain just thought of him as a neighbor. Not even an acquaintance, just a... stranger.

Which was just as Sunny wanted it. To be on the safe side, he could avoid leaving the house for a while, altogether.

...And yet, in the evening, he found himself sitting on the porch again, enjoying the view and a cup of tea, as he had already grown used to.

'After yesterday, I doubt that she'll ever want to approach this house again. So I should be alright...'

But as it turned out, he was not.

Sunny noticed Rain walking from the public transport terminal long before she came anywhere near his home, because one of his shadows was stationed further down the street to keep a lookout. He sighed, then lowered his eyes and pretended to study the synthwood surface of the porch, hoping to avoid making eye contact with the teenage girl.

This time, he was not going to give her a reason to come closer and talk to him.

However, it was all for naught. When Rain approached the path leading to his door, she slowed down a bit, hesitated, then turned and walked directly to him.

'What the hell...'

Sunny raised his head and stared at her with a bit of surprise.

"Uh... hi. It's you again."

She nodded, then took off her backpack and produced a big food container out of it, seemingly full of something delicious. Then, Rain handed it to Sunny.

"Here. My mom made it. Your friend said to bring food, right? Oh... and I'm really sorry. For, you know... yesterday."

Sunny blinked a couple of times, then took the container from her hands and stared at it for a bit.

'Damn Effie... who told her to ask for food? I cook great food for the both of us myself!'

Then, he pretended to smile and said:

"Yeah, she did. And no problem. Say thanks to your mom."

Sunny thought that the conversation would be over after that, but Rain lingered. There was a sort of curious expression on her face.

"It's nothing much, just some pasta with mushrooms and cream sauce. My favorite. Uh... Sunny, right? I'm Rain, by the way."

He looked at the food container again, reevaluating his stance on its existence. Nothing special, huh... he was willing to bet that the ingredients she listed were all natural, too. A far cry from synthpaste people like him usually consumed to keep their bellies full in the outskirts. Sunny knew a few guys who would kill to eat something like this.

His smile became more genuine.

"Yup, I'm Sunny. Nice to meet you, Rain."

She smiled slightly, hesitated for a few moments, and then asked:

"So you're really eighteen? And live alone in your own house? I mean, with that nice friend of yours."

Sunny shrugged.

"Sure. She's just staying over until she finds a place of her own, though. Why?"

The girl looked at him with wide eyes.

"I mean... aren't you a bit young to live on your own? Aren't your parents worried?"

He stared at her for a couple of seconds, then tilted his head a little.

"I think that I'm of a perfect age to live on my own. And no, my parents aren't worried about me one bit."

Rain smiled, as though hearing the most fascinating thing ever.

"But, like... who cooks your food? No, wait... who buys your food? Do you get an allowance? Or do you have a stipend from your university? Wait... do you even go to a university? I have so many questions!"

Sunny mentally groaned.

'Questions... I hate questions!'

Outwardly, though, he remained calm.

"What kind of questions are those? Obviously, I buy and cook my food myself. And who needs a university? A stipend! I am a wildly successful young entrepreneur, if you must know. Basically, I do whatever I want."

Rain stared at him.

"And your parent just let you? They're not lecturing you every day about the future, the importance of having a productive career, and how you must be always ready in case you get infected by the Spell?"

Sunny furrowed his brow.

"No, none of those."

Rain looked at him with envy and sighed.

"You're lucky! My mom and dad are like hawks!"

'...What the hell is a hawk? Something bad, I presume...'

He remained silent for a while, a complicated expression appearing on his face.

Finally, Sunny said:

"...Don't be hard on your mom and dad. You're the lucky one, really. I sort of twisted the truth a little. My parents don't care about where I am and what I do... because I don't have parents. So... I would rather be in your situation than mine, great as it is. Yours is a bit greater."

Rain stopped smiling and looked at him with a hard-to-read, sad expression on her pale face. Then, she said quietly:

"Oh... I see. Sorry. I didn't know."

She smiled a little and waved.

"Well, I'll be going then. Enjoy the pasta, Sunny!"

The young girl put her backpack back on, turned around, and left.

Sunny remained on the porch for a while, staring at the tray of food. Slowly, a dark expression settled on his face.

'I can't continue doing nothing anymore... I need to make a decision and proceed. I wasted too much time as it is, already...'

He avoided doing anything about getting Rain ready for the possibility of becoming infected by the Spell, because he didn't know what to do, and how.

But this inaction had to stop. He had to come up with something...

Chapter 483: Two Hundred Seconds

The problem was, he just didn't know enough to make a good decision. And even then... was he even qualified to make it?

Sunny had a lot of experience dealing with various situations, possessed a quick wit, and was street smart, as well as having a real talent for killing things and remaining alive.

Without wasting time on false modesty, he could admit that he excelled at many things.

But were the things he excelled at even applicable to training a young girl for the Nightmare Spell? After all, what he wanted to give her were not combat skills or survival tactics... those she was being taught already, in an elite school that someone like him would have never been able to attend.

What he wanted to give her was a mindset that would allow her to survive in the unforgiving hell of the Dream Realm. And mind... mind was a delicate thing.

If he went about it in the wrong way, he could bring more harm than good.

Not to mention that everyone was different, and what worked for him was not guaranteed to work for someone else. Take his own friends, for example... all of them had wildly diverging mindsets, but each had been able to thrive even in a place as dire and harrowing as the Forgotten Shore.

'So... what the hell do I do?!'

Sunny massaged his temples, then sighed.

First... he had to observe more and understand more. Whatever he wanted to decide, it was stupid to try and base that decision on observing Rain for a single day as she went about her classes.

'Maybe I'll get inspired. Or my intuition will give me a hint...'

With that thought, he frowned, finished his tea, and went inside.

The next morning, Sunny left his house early and used the transit system to reach the district where Rain's school was located.

Now that he knew the place, he didn't need to follow his sister around. Instead, he went ahead, returned to the cafe he had hidden in the last time, and sent one of his shadows to keep watch on the entrance of the school as it waited for the young girl to appear.

Half an hour later, he noticed her figure and silently ordered the shadow to follow Rain inside.

'I am going to have to keep studying her demeanor for a while... a few weeks, at least. By then, it is going to be clear if my initial impression was right, or if I need to reconsider my evaluation. I'll also understand her strengths and weaknesses much better.'

Sunny had to stop himself from groaning.

A few weeks... that was going to really eat into his time. Both the hunt for shadow fragments and his training with Effie and Saint were going to suffer. Which was such a shame. Recently, he was starting to feel a hint of confidence when handling the Cruel Sight in its spear form.

Previously, Sunny had mistakenly considered the spear to be a rather static weapon, one mostly capable of only straightforward thrusting attacks. And on the surface, it was... more than that, this was actually one of its best features.

Anyone could use a spear with a decent level of effectiveness. That was why it ruled the battlefield for thousands of years — unlike the sword, a person didn't need endless hours of practice to become a proficient amateur with it.

But in the hands of a master... in the hands of a master, the spear was a completely different beast. It was swift, deadly, and unpredictable, capable of a vast variety of attacks at a wide array of ranges. It was a truly versatile weapon capable of dealing devastating damage to anyone who would dare to approach its wielder. What Sunny liked the most, though, was how deceiving a spear could be.

Cruel Sight, in particular, was especially flexible due to its long blade, which could both pierce and slash. Not to mention the fact that the length of its shaft could be changed at will.

...Sunny was still much more comfortable with swords, though. Especially familiar ones, like the Midnight Shard of the great odachi form of the Soul Serpent. He was growing rather fond of the ability to keep his enemies further away from his body that the Cruel Sight gave him, nevertheless.

So it was a real shame that he was going to have to reduce the amount of time he trained by a lot. That was not even the main reason why he felt discontent about the prospect of spending weeks observing Rain at school, though.

The main reason was... teenagers.

Sunny clearly remembered the mental trauma he had experienced after being forced to watch the young elites attending the prestigious school making life difficult for both themselves and the teachers. Even after having to fall into an endless abyss while eating the rotten meat of a devil and burning in the ocean of divine flames, he would rather repeat the whole thing than experience school life again...

Well, almost.

Not really...

With a sigh, Sunny concentrated on the pastry in front of him and prepared for a long and arduous day. That pastry alone made his mood better, simply because of the fact that it didn't come from a Mimic.

The young elites were the same — venomous, incredibly misguided, and infuriating. Luckily, Rain was also the same — she studied quietly and avoided all the drama, which basically made her a pariah.

'Good girl, Rain... that's right, disregard all the nonsense and learn as much as you can. Knowledge is a privilege... these classmates of yours are too stupid to value it, but you're not...'

Well, it wasn't as though they were some delinquents, either. Academic achievement was the cornerstone of the social hierarchy in this elite school, so the competition among the students was fierce. It was just that most saw learning as a tool to earn status, as opposed to the goal.

Not that their priorities were any of Sunny's business.

Hour went after hour, and at some point, he decided to leave the cafe and take a walk to chase away the boredom.

But before he could, however, something happened.

His communicator suddenly let out a grating, echoing ringing sound. A second later, the sound repeated.

...And it wasn't only just him. Every person in the cafe, from the clients to the members of the staff, was receiving the same notification.

Sunny's chest grew cold.

He knew that sound, of course. Everyone in the world knew and dreaded it.

Looking down, he saw the familiar text appear on the screen of his communicator.

'No...'

The notification read:

EMERGENCY ALERT

EMERGENCY ALERT

GATE ACTIVITY DETECTED IN YOUR PROXIMITY

ETA: 201 SECONDS

EVACUATE IMMEDIATELY!

The Novel will be updated first on this website. Come back and continue reading tomorrow, everyone!

Chapter 484: The Gate | Shadow Slave

'A Gate... there is a Gate...'

Before Sunny even comprehended these words, he was trembling, cold fear rising from the depths of his heart to swallow him whole. This was not a conscious response, but an instinctual reaction — something that his body had learned to do in the past, the terror that all modern humans came to bear in their very bones.

The grating, echoing ringing meant only one thing — run! Run if you wish to live, if you don't want to die in a manner so harrowing that words could not describe it.

But Sunny wasn't a mundane human anymore.

Strangling the instinctual fear, he threw it aside and stared at the screen of the communicator with a dark expression on his face.

The notification was similar to the ones he had seen several times in the past. Previously, when he lived in the outskirts, he had learned of the devastation an opening Gate could bring firsthand. Wherever you lived, you were bound to hear that sound once every few years.

Granted, the infrastructure in the outskirts was way less developed than in the proper parts of the city, and there wasn't a lot of Awakened around. So the results were often more disastrous.

He was in a very respectable district right now.

But ironically, things were much worse.

Sunny wasn't very versed in the technology the government used to detect the appearing Gates in advance, but he knew that it failed this time. Usually, people would receive a notification at least ten minutes, half an hour, sometimes even days before the dreaded event.

This gave most of them time to evacuate out of the impact zone, and also allowed the government forces to arrive before the flood of Nightmare Creatures broke free of the opening Gate and cut through the ranks of the nearby Awakened who tried to stall it.

Two hundred seconds... that was nothing. Less than nothing. It was not nearly enough time for people to run, and not nearly enough for help to arrive. Such a small time window meant only one thing...

That unless something happened, there was going to be a massacre.

He was safe, though. He could just Shadow Step away at any moment.

As people jumped to their feet and ran to the exit with panicked expressions, Sunny sighed and pressed on the notification.

Immediately, a map opened up, showing him the location of where the Gate was going to appear, as well as optimal evacuation routes.

'Too close...'

There was no way that Rain's school was going to be able to evacuate thousands of students in time. If their hazard protocols were well established, they were not even going to try. They would just gather the children in the most protected part of the school, activate their defense systems, and try to hold until help arrived.

The school was in the direct vicinity of the opening Gate, though. Sunny wasn't sure how well its defenses would do, no matter how formidable they were. Even if there were several Awakened staffed as security personnel or instructors for this exact eventuality, they wouldn't be able to do much. The true elites would not take such positions, after all.

'What to do...'

This time, the notification interface was different from how Sunny had seen it in the past.

There was an additional, urgently blinking symbol on the map. It was very similar to the insignia Master Jet wore on her sleeve, only this one had two stars on it instead of three.

This symbol was there because the communicator knew that Sunny was an Awakened.

...There were one hundred and ninety-two seconds remaining until the Gate opened. Out in the classroom where one of his shadows was currently hiding, the children and the teacher were still staring at the notification with stunned expressions, not yet comprehending what it meant exactly. Or simply refusing to...

Not paying a lot of attention to the chaos happening around him, Sunny pressed on the symbol, and additional information appeared on the screen.

ATTENTION ALL AWAKENED

REQUEST IMMEDIATE ACTION

ATTENTION ALL AWAKENED

REQUEST IMMEDIATE...

Below that, several lines of text shimmered:

Gate Category: 2 (89% probability), 3 (10% probability), HIGHER (undefined).

Strike Force ETA: 16 min, 14 sec.

'Thirteen minutes!'

A corner of Sunny's twitched, a resentful grimace appearing on his face.

The earliest any government force would be able to arrive to the Gate was in thirteen minutes after it had opened. Thirteen minutes... that might as well have been an eternity.

'Too long!'

And now, Sunny had to make a decision.

He had to either run away or respond to the call to arms to stand in front of the Nightmare Gate, hoping to survive in the flood of monsters for thirteen entire minutes.

Well... it wasn't that hard of a decision, really. Sunny knew that he was going to stay — not out of any sort of moral obligation, but simply because he wanted to.

He was equally as reluctant to turn tail and allow the Spell to invade his world with impunity as he was to see countless nice, mundane humans die in the maws of Nightmare Creatures. Like the polite waitress who served him the delicious pastries, or the baker who had made them.

This was his world, his city, and his fellow humans. Before, Sunny was always weak and had no choice but to run, hide, and tremble in fear.

...He was done living his life in fear a long time ago, though. He was also done allowing anyone — or anything — to take what was his without a bloody fight.

He was done being weak.

But even that wasn't the real reason. Perhaps Sunny would have considered the approaching disaster too much of a risk and retreated... but Rain was there, very near to the center of the map displaying the Gate's impact zone.

So really, running away wasn't even an option.

One hundred and eighty seconds remained.

Now left alone in the empty cafe, Sunny stood up and stretched. A heavy sigh escaped from his lips.

"This is going to be... a wild, wild ride..."

Chapter 485: Lesser Evil | Shadow Slave

Now that he knew that he was — insanity! — going to act, Sunny had to decide how exactly, and do it very fast.

Sadly, the question was not as easy as it seemed.

His life was too complicated for anything to be easy...

Not only was the answer to the question not too obvious, but, what's worse, he had mere seconds to make a decision, which was not nearly enough to think things through with any sort of clarity.

But what choice did he have? None at all...

Sunny grimaced.

'Let's speedrun our options.'

The safest and most cowardly option was to Shadow Step into the classroom through the shadow spying on Rain, grab the girl, and bring her away.

At least it seemed safe on the surface.

In reality, though, such an action would cause all types of terrible consequences both for him and for his sister. Not only was he going to have a lot of explaining to do, revealing all the things he wanted to keep hidden, he would also leave countless witnesses, as well as digital evidence, connecting Rain to him and vice versa.

In the future, whenever he was going to end up having really dangerous enemies — which Sunny had no doubt would happen one day, soon — that evidence was going to come to light and lead them to her. Which was not something he was willing to accept.

So, he was going to leave that option as the last resort, and act on it only if the school's defenses were breached and Rain was in imminent danger.

With that out of the way, there was only one path left — doing his civil duty and going directly to the Gate, in hopes of stalling the tide of Nightmare Creatures long enough for the cavalry to arrive.

Awakened who didn't work for the government were expected and encouraged, but not technically obligated to respond to a call like that. Many, maybe even most, did not, and chose to run instead. And who could blame them? Not everyone with an Aspect was a combatant, and even those who were had not become one voluntarily.

Forcing these already traumatized people to go to their potential deaths under the threat of retribution if they refused was not something the government was eager to do. Or maybe, it simply couldn't — forcing Awakened to do anything was a dangerous idea, since they could potentially topple the government if pushed too much.

So, the government preferred to use a carrot instead of a stick when dealing with them. It was a delicate balance.

Sunny wasn't sure that he was even going to see that carrot, though. Because he was facing a dilemma.

Yes, he had decided to fight in front of the Gate, but this could also be done in several ways.

...Two ways, really.

Sunny could go into battle as himself, or... as Mongrel, protecting his identity from the prying eyes, and himself from any attention.

Using Weaver's Mask was not without risk, as every time he did so without proper preparations could potentially leave behind context clues that would allow smart people to narrow down the list of suspects.

But the alternative... right now, with not a lot of time to weigh all the pros and cons, Sunny felt that the alternative was worse.

If he wanted to have a hope of surviving for thirteen minutes, he was going to have to go all out, showcasing the full scope of his true powers. That meant that all his efforts to create an image of a talented, but not too dangerous or noteworthy young Awakened were going to be destroyed.

He was going to become really, really famous... and draw the eyes of entities he wanted to remain blind to his existence for as long as possible.

Perhaps even worse, he was going to create one too many coincidences for Rain to continue not noticing his secret attention. It was one thing to have a quirky neighbor... if he suddenly showed up near your school in your moment of need, and turned out to be one of the most deadly Awakened of his generation, though... that would most likely be enough to make her start asking questions that Sunny wasn't ready to answer.

So...

Awakened Sunless was going to have to cowardly run away from the Gate.

While Mongrel was going to have to stand and fight.

'What a messed up situation...'

One hundred and seventy seconds remained.

Sunny sighed, knowing full well that this decision was not ideal. At the minimum, Mongrel's persona prevented him from using some of his most powerful tools — anything that people knew and associated with Sunny, no less. Like the Cruel Sight...

Very few people had seen him use Saint, however. In fact, outside of Neph's cohort, Mordret was pretty much the only person who had. There were also the people he had fought the Lord of the Dead with, but all of them were gone now... with one notable exception. Seishan was still alive and out there somewhere, in the embrace of one of the three Great Clans.

So summoning Saint was not ideal, too. Even though someone else could have received a similar Echo, revealing her was really risky. He could only do it if things got really desperate.

'Uh... maybe I should reconsider...'

But there was no time to consider things anymore.

There were less than three minutes left before the Gate opened. He would just have to manage, somehow.

Sunny closed his eyes for a moment, then checked where the cameras monitoring the cafe were located, and walked into their blind zone. There, he summoned the Covetous Coffin, placed his communicator on its lid, and sent the box scurrying in the direction opposite of where he himself was headed.

After that, Sunny took a deep breath... and dissipated into the shadows.

A few seconds later and hundreds of meters away, an armored figure wearing a fearsome black mask walked out of the darkness, the blade of the great odachi resting on its shoulder.

Mongrel had arrived to the Nightmare Gate.

Chapter 486: Call Of A Nightmare

The road ahead of Sunny was almost empty. Only several people could still be seen, running away from the vertical line where the air was rippling strangely, a hundred or so meters behind their backs. When they saw his menacing figure, the stragglers recoiled. Someone let out a frightened yelp.

Not paying them any attention, Sunny calmly walked forward.

The Soul Serpent rested on his shoulder.

'Strange... I have never seen an opening Gate up close before.'

The deserted street in front of him did, indeed, look very eerie. Not only because it was almost entirely empty, both of pedestrians and of rushing PTVs, but also because light and shadows were behaving very strangely, the hue of the light slightly wrong, the movement of the shadows slightly erratic.

The sound was strange, too. It was deadly quiet, but at the same time, Sunny couldn't get rid of the feeling that there were barely audible noises coming from all directions, assaulting his ears like an inaudible cacophony of muffled, distant, demented screams.

There was a strange pressure rising in the air, getting stronger the closer he got to the nascent Nightmare Gate.

The Gate itself was easy to recognize. It looked like a tall vertical depression in the fabric of the world, a place where light refracted in unnatural ways and the inaudible screams were the loudest... not a rift in reality yet, but a hint of one.

In front of the Gate, half a dozen people stood, staring at it in tense silence. The Awakened who, just like Sunny, decided to answer the call.

'Only six of them...'

While that fact didn't promise him anything good, it was to be expected. Two hundred seconds was just not enough for a lot of willing defenders to arrive. Even those who were ready to risk their lives in an attempt to protect the civilians needed time to get to the Gate, after all... this bunch were those who had already been in the immediate impact zone when the alert was sent to their communicators, just like Sunny.

Maybe they were overly confident in their abilities, or maybe, just like he, they had people they cared about in the surrounding area, perhaps even in the very same school where Rain was, a few hundred meters behind their backs.

In any case, he couldn't help but feel a bit of respect toward these people. Coming to a Gate already required a lot of courage... remaining even after it became clear that there were going to be less than ten Awakened fighting side by side to stall the tide of monsters was beyond that.

These people were ready to die to fulfill their duty.

'...Fools. Brave, brave fools.'

What about Sunny himself, then?

'I am a fool, too. But a cowardly one.'

Sunny had no plans of dying today. He knew what he was doing, and had ways to escape if things got too dire.

Without slowing down even a little, he calmly walked past the six Awakened and stopped with his back to them, closer to the Gate than anyone else.

Unwittingly, Sunny found himself standing at the head of the small group of defenders.

Unlike them, he showed no sign of fear. The others were staring at the Gate with pale faces, their bodies tense, their eyes full of unease and dark

resentment. Sunny's pose, however, was confident, indifferent... almost relaxed.

And in the eyes of the fearsome mask, there was nothing but darkness.

The others reacted to his arrival with excitement. One more Awakened to fight with them was already a good thing, but this one, in particular, looked especially imposing. His onyx armor and fearsome blade were obviously a cut above the Memories they themselves had in their possession, and his calm demeanor suggested either an experienced fighter... or a madman.

And then, someone recognized him.

"Wait... isn't that M—mongrel?!"

The others looked at the girl who spoke with confusion.

"Who?"

She stared at them with wide eyes.

"That's... that's Lord Mongrel! Haven't you heard of him?"

A hint of recognition appeared in the eyes of the Awakened gathered in front of the opening Gate. One of them glanced at Sunny, lingered for a moment, and asked:

"I am sorry, friend. This young woman seems to have heard of you. If I may ask, are you an Awakened of some renown?"

Sunny didn't move a muscle, and lied almost on autopilot:

"...I am not an Awakened. I have no renown."

The man raised an eyebrow.

"What do you mean, not an Awakened? Then who are you?"

Sunny cursed inwardly.

'My damned tongue...'

He gritted his teeth, remained silent for a second, and then answered in a calm tone:

"I am just a human."

Then, he sighed and turned his head slightly, staring at the six Awakened.

From the look of their Memories and how they held themselves, they weren't elites. Several seemed to know how to hold a sword, but that was all. They were going to get eaten alive once the Gate opened.

Disheartened, he asked:

"Combat Aspects?"

The defenders looked at each other, and then the girl who had recognized him answered:

"I have an Awakened Aspect that enhances my agility and allows me to strike with deadly precision. Two guys have Dormant Aspects centered around endurance and strength, and the other two can perform ranged elemental attacks."

So, three weak Combat Aspects, two supporting fighters, and no one capable of proper support or healing.

He lowered his head for a moment.

There were only thirty seconds left before the Gate opened. Slight tremors were running through the ground beneath his feet, and bits of dust and small pieces of gravel were slowly rising into the air, levitating on the invisible currents of energy coursing through the air.

'How I am going to do this?'

Sunny gripped the hilt of the Soul Serpent tighter, then said hoarsely:

"Stay back, kill anything that gets past me."

He paused for a moment, and then added:

"...Make them bleed."

The girl stared at him with wide eyes.

"Stay... stay back? But, sir, you can't do it alone! There will be a horde of them! Even if there were a hundred of you, that wouldn't be enough to kill them all!"

Sunny turned away and looked at the slowly opening rift in front of him.

How could he get these people to stay out of his way? The best place for them to be was at the back, finishing off anything that Sunny failed to kill and preventing the Nightmare Creatures from escaping into the city... escaping toward Rain's school.

Failing to come up with a better lie, he opened his mouth and said coldly:

"One of me is enough to kill them all."

With that, Sunny left the girl standing there with an open mouth, and walked forward.

'What's the big deal, anyway? It's... it's just a Nightmare Gate...'

His legs, however, were trembling a little.

Just at that moment, an especially strong tremor ran through the ground.

The shadows exploded in a mad dance, the sunlight growing dim and ghostly.

The wind howled through the empty street, as if the air was being sucked into the widening rift.

And then, an invisible shockwave spread out of it, making the windows in the surrounding building shatter.

Sunny resisted the push and suddenly felt the familiar feeling permeate his soul.

...The call of a Nightmare.

The Gate had opened.

The Novel will be updated first on this website. Come back and continue reading tomorrow, everyone!

Chapter 487: First Wave | Shadow Slave

Sunny took a step forward and brandished the Soul Serpent, feeling the indomitable nature of Saint's grounded battle style permeate his bones. The gloomy shadow wrapped itself around the blade of the odachi, causing it to shine with dark radiance.

Just like the taciturn demon, this Serpent shared a kinship with the shadow, and as such, the augmentation it received was even more powerful than Sunny himself could enjoy. Even though the odachi was only of the Dormant Rank, for now, this alone made it equal to an Awakened blade in terms of sharpness, durability, and lethality.

He activated the [Living Stone] and [Feather of Truth] enchantments of the onyx armor to make it light as a feather and able to heal the damage it was bound to receive.

Then, Sunny summoned the Blood Blossom charm and willed the armor to integrate it, activating the [Underworld Armament] enchantment. This way, the enhancing effect the crimson flower had on his Memories and Shadows was going to be inherited by the Mantle itself, and then strengthened even further.

He had not told the other Awakened to make the Nightmare Creatures bleed just to seem cool. He literally needed there to be as much blood flowing to the pavement as possible, so that his armor and sword became as powerful as possible.

The Gate was open now, revealing a dark rift in the fabric of reality, as wide as the street itself and as tall as the buildings. It seemed to devour all light around it... and call to him.

Call for him to enter.

...Sunny wasn't too preoccupied with the gate itself, though. His gaze was locked on the unclear silhouettes moving through the darkness.

Soon, the first Nightmare Creature burst into the daylight, leaving cracks on the asphalt with its black claws.

‘...Good.’

Had he not wanted to accumulate shadow fragments? Had he not wanted to raise the counter of the [Prince of the Underworld] enchantment?

Well, he should have been careful about what he wished for!

There were going to be hundreds of abominations coming through the rift today to satiate his wish...

The Second Category Gates were the most frequent to appear in the waking world. As such, everyone was familiar with how they functioned.

The first few waves of advancing Nightmare Creatures were not going to be too terrible, at least for a fighter of Sunny's caliber. They would be comprised mostly of Dormant creatures, with some Awakened abominations mixed in. Their Classes and numbers, too, would be comparatively low.

But these first few waves... they were just a hint of the horror to come.

Pretty soon, every Nightmare Creature coming from the Gate was going to be of the Awakened Rank, with more and more Fallen ones appearing as well. Their Classes were going to rise, until there were as many Demons as there were Monsters and Beasts around.

And if Sunny was still alive by the time this second stage was nearing its culmination... well, two things could happen, neither promising him anything good.

Either the Gate was going to end up really being of the Second Category, or not.

If it continued to grow, reaching the Third Category, then there would be more and more waves of Nightmare Creatures, hundreds of Fallen abominations lunging into the real world from the dark void between

worlds, with Corrupted horrors and creatures of higher Classes appearing among them.

If it didn't... then, the Guardian of the Gate would manifest itself into reality. The Guardian was always at least one Rank higher than the Gate's Category, and could be of any high Class, from a Devil... to a dreaded Titan.

...In any case, Sunny had to live through the initial waves first to find out what was going to kill him in the end.

The first creature to appear from the darkness resembled a terrifying hound with bloodred bone spikes growing from its mottled, black fur. It landed on the road and opened its maw, then produced a guttural, hoarse roar.

...And then abruptly grew silent as Shadow Serpent's blade slashed across its neck, severing its head entirely.

[You have slain a Dormant Beast...]

Sunny jumped back, and just as he did, more silhouettes lunged at him from the dark rift, their eyes burning with madness and bloodthirst as they smelled what was waiting for them up ahead...

A whole world full of defenseless, untainted souls for them to devour.

'Not so fast, you filth...'

Sunny had a very simple plan.

He was going to build a barrier in front of the Gate.

...He was going to build a mountain of bleeding corpses right at the border of the darkness, to show the next waves of Nightmare Creatures how welcoming the real world was to their kind.

As soon as more spiked hounds entered into the light, he lunged forward to meet them.

Blood sprayed into the air, and as the menacing odachi reaped another life, Sunny shifted his weight, slammed the pommel of the sword into the face of a lunging creature, then swiftly stepped forward and pierced the third one through the throat.

Before the drops of blood even fell to the ground, he tore the blade from the corpse of the abomination, slicing it almost in half, and brought his heel on the skull of the beast he had previously slammed to the ground. In the process, he increased the weight of the Mantle of the Underworld, so the creature's head simply exploded under his boot.

All of it took no more than two seconds.

...And on the third second, a dozen hellish beasts emerged from the rift, some of them running, some of them jumping high into the air to land on him from above.

Behind them, a macabre wall of flesh, claws, and fangs was spilling out of the darkness like a rabid tide.

Sunny growled, feeling the enchantment of the Blood Blossom activate and fill his sword with an unquenchable bloodlust.

‘Come! Come, you bastards! Let this mongrel guide you all to hell!’

Chapter 488: A Beast More Terrible

No matter how fast Sunny was, how intricate his control of the shadow essence was — he had spent a whole month doing nothing but practicing it, after all — no matter how strong his body could become as the result, he still couldn't be in several places at the same time.

Yes, he had two cores brimming with power, and his armor and his weapon were augmented by a combination of an Aspect Ability and enchantments. Killing one of the infernal hounds without receiving a hit was not that big of a problem... several, even.

But a dozen? That was too much, even for him.

So Sunny didn't even try.

At this point, Mantle of the Underworld was as close to the pinnacle of the Ascended Rank as a Memory could be, so these Dormant beasts had no chance of piercing it with their fangs. He could allow himself to be bitten a few times.

He just had to be strategic about it.

He had to protect his neck and the back of his head, as well as pay attention to balance and mass. Yes, the abominations couldn't get to his flesh just yet, but an impact was still an impact. If he wasn't careful, the bastards were going to topple him, and once he was on the ground, the game would be over.

Luckily, he had [Feather of Truth] at his disposal and could manipulate the weight of the onyx armor, turning it from incredibly light to as heavy as a mountain. In conjunction with the cautious use of Saint's grounded style, which excelled at solid footwork and indomitability, he could stay upright no matter how many beasts attacked him.

Ignoring the creatures that were lunging at him from the ground, Sunny dashed to the side to avoid being landed on by one of the jumping hounds,

and received another on the tip of the odachi, allowing the momentum to impale it on the sword.

Before the heavy carcass could weigh the Shadow Serpent down, Sunny used the long hilt as a lever and slammed the dead creature into the mass of its attacking kin.

By that time, one jaw was already closing on his thigh, and another was centimeters away from his forearm.

The bloodred fangs scraped against the stonelike metal of the onyx armor, not leaving even a scratch on it.

Sunny let go of the hilt of the odachi with one hand, then hooked its blade under the throat of one of the attacking abominations and made a simple move forward, slicing through tough fur, skin, and vulnerable flesh beneath.

His other fist landed on the head of the second beast. Unseen to anyone, the Moonlight Shard appeared in it at the last moment, its ghostly blade easily piercing the creature's skull and disappearing as fast as it had appeared after destroying its brain.

Sunny spun, throwing both corpses aside, caught the hilt of the odachi with his second hand, made a small thrust to pierce a lunging hound's head right through one of its eyes, and then dashed forward to descend on the group of them entangled in the carcass of the abomination he had caught on the tip of his blade earlier.

What happened next could only be described as a morbid, bloody dance. Sunny moved through the mass of Nightmare Creatures, much faster than any of them were, his great sword flying through them with graceful and fluid logic, sending more and more blood spraying into the air. Somehow, he managed to avoid most of their attacks, and those he did not ended up sliding fruitlessly from his armor.

He almost made it look easy.

...But of course, it wasn't.

Any of these beasts, even though they were only Dormant, could massacre countless mundane humans, or kill a less skillful Awakened in one fell lunge. It was just that today, they met a far more terrifying creature.

A true Awakened fighter.

And a monstrous one, at that...

Sunny cut through the mass of spiked hounds, strategically leaving many of them maimed, but alive. They could only bleed as long as they weren't dead, after all. And he needed them to bleed a lot to bring the Blood Blossom to the peak of its strength.

There were many of them around him... too many, really. But that, too, could be used to his advantage. He used the corpses of the beasts he had slain, the ones he had left alive, and those who were yet to meet his blade as a barrier to slow down the others. Through superior speed and clever positioning, he was able to not only always remain moving, but also evade being surrounded.

Things weren't exactly easy, but he was still managing without too much strain. His main problem right now was to not allow any of the abominations to move past him and escape into the streets.

Luckily, the few that did manage to slip by were quickly finished by the six Awakened staying behind, observing the massacre with grim, tense, and darkly awed expressions.

However, Sunny wasn't oblivious to the fact that this successful start was an illusion.

The first wave was just an appetizer, after all. Simply a hint of the true calamity to come.

So, his goal, for now, was to kill as many of the dormant beasts as he could, bring the augmentation of the Blood Blossom to considerable strength, and throw as many corpses at the stretch of cracked asphalt directly in front of

the Gate as possible, to make it harder for the stronger abominations to enter into the real at full speed.

He felt the dreaded change too soon, though.

It came in a form of an eerie, long whistle that suddenly made the hounds lunge at him with renewed fury.

And then...

A crude arrow suddenly flashed out of the darkness of the rift, almost hitting him in the eye. The arrowhead, fashioned out of a splinter of a red bone, exploded against the wood of Weaver's Mask, throwing his head back.

‘What the...’

He swiftly repositioned and caught his balance, then dashed forward and skewered several beasts on the blade of the Shadow Serpent.

More arrows flew out of the darkness, piercing the flesh of the attacking hounds or sliding off the onyx surface of the Mantle of the Underworld.

He felt each hit, though. The power behind these arrows was truly monstrous.

‘Awakened... Awakened creatures are coming! Already?!’

As soon as he thought that, the first of the hunters came out of the darkness, following their hounds into the real world.

Sunny gritted his teeth.

A tall, desiccated humanoid with skin as black as coal and as rough as the bark of an ancient tree, wearing rotten remains of fur armor, raised a mighty bow made out of wood and bone, and looked at him with empty holes where his eyes should have been.

Furious, red flames burned in their darkness instead.

‘Crap!’

Sunny grabbed one of the hounds and hoisted its body up... just in time for the arrow to pierce its body instead of hitting him in the face.

‘Bows, they're using bows?!’

How was that even fair?!

Feeling the bloodlust of the Blossom charm surge in his heart, Sunny threw the dying hound at the bone hunter, gripped his sword, and dashed forward once again.

Chapter 489: Second Wave | Shadow Slave

There were several ancient archers aiming at him already, and more and more of the hunters were appearing from the darkness. Some wielded bows, some spears with jagged flint blades and crude axes.

Those were Awakened Monsters, each and every one — equal in Rank and Class to Carapace Centurions Sunny had fought once, a long time ago, on the Forgotten Shore.

And to Sunny himself, technically.

...A much tougher enemy for him to slaughter.

Luckily, unlike the massive centurions, the hunters weren't covered in adamantite chitin from head to toe.

Ducking under the flying arrow, Sunny lunged forward and thrust the tip of the odachi into the desiccated flesh of one of the bowmen. The black, bark-like skin offered a lot of resistance to the shadow-honed blade, but the force of the blow was terrible enough to rip through flesh and bone, allowing it to pierce the body of the hunter and emerge from his back.

Sunny just hoped that these bastards had anatomy similar to humans, and that their hearts were located in the same place.

From the look of it, they were... however, the monster did not react to having his heart destroyed as a human would. Instead of dying, he simply grabbed the blade of the Shadow Serpent and took a step forward, skewering himself deeper onto it, in an attempt to reach Sunny with the other hand.

‘Curses!’

Sunny twisted the blade, severing the monster's fingers, and then pulled the odachi upward, slicing through his ribcage, neck, and skull.

This, finally, caused the bowman to die.

[You have slain an Awakened Monster, Ancient Barrow Wraith.]

‘Revenants... great! Simply great, damn it!’

So he was fighting corpses that were possessed by some sort of a murderous spirit... as such, the hunters weren't fully sentient. That didn't stop them from remembering some of their craft, though. Not only were they able to wield their stone weapons with deadly skill, they also seemed to coordinate their attacks, herding Sunny like prey.

The archers moved apart so that he would have no choice but to show his back to one while attacking another. Those with melee weapons rushed forward, aiming to surround him. The situation was quickly turning desperate.

Sunny gritted his teeth, dodged a strike of a stone axe, saw it shatter the asphalt into dust, and lashed out with the Shadow Serpent. Just a moment after the blade of the great odachi severed the attacker's legs, another arrow hit him in the shoulder, causing Sunny to stagger and almost lose his balance.

He glanced around him, noticing that the enemies had succeeded in positioning themselves in a way that would have doomed a normal enemy. He was surrounded from all sides, with archers hiding behind mighty hunters wielding spears and axes.

‘Damn it. I didn't want to do this...’

As a dozen arrows streaked through the air to bite at his armor... Sunny suddenly disappeared.

A moment later, he appeared behind one of the archers and decapitated him with one terrible strike.

Before others even had time to register what had happened, Sunny was inexplicably at the opposite side of their formation, his odachi piercing the

head of another archer.

Almost leaving afterimages behind, the figure of the warrior in the menacing onyx armor seemed to blink between half a dozen monsters in the span of a few seconds. Each time it appeared, one of the creatures died, their black bodies crumbling into piles of severed limbs and shattered skulls. The blade of the great odachi shone with dark radiance, cutting through the ancient hunters like a reaper's scythe.

A few moments later, Sunny slid backward on the broken asphalt, leaving a bloody trail behind.

A low growl escaped from beneath his mask.

Enhanced by the [Underworld Armament], the enchantment of the Blood Blossom was behaving strangely. It was supposed to augment his Memories, Echoes, and Shadows, but with so much blood flowing to the ground, Sunny found that even his body and mind were being affected by the morbid charm a little.

He felt both exhilarated and frustrated — exhilarated by the slaughter he was perpetrating, and frustrated because he wanted... needed... to kill more, cut more, make them bleed more, more, more, so much more...

'Blood... blood... more!'

Sunny basked in the ecstasy of bloodshed for a split second, and then lashed out at himself, making the rabid thirst recede.

He needed to be careful. This bloodlust was beneficial, but could easily blind him. He had to maintain clarity... that was the only way to control the flow of the battle and survive. Thankfully, he knew how to keep a cool head better than most.

...Regardless, although using Shadow Step so many times in rapid succession cost him a lot of shadow essence, he had managed to break the enemy formation and eliminate most of the archers. The rest were going to be much easier to deal with now.

But of course, the Gate was not done with him. It continued to spew more and more enemies, making any progress he had made meaningless.

As a new wave of hunters emerged from the darkness, a frenzied mass of hounds rushing between the wraiths, he paled a little.

‘...Too many!’

No matter how superior his armor, weapon, and skill were, he was going to get buried under the tide of Nightmare Creatures due to their momentum.

And even if he managed to cut a hole in the wall of abominations, the rest were going to move past him and descend upon the six Awakened, and then, inevitably, escape into the streets of the city.

Toward Rain's school.

‘Damn! This is going to suck!’

As the new wave of creatures lunged forward, joining the survivors of the previous one, Sunny shifted his Memories around. For a brief second, the Broken Oath took the place of the Blood Blossom, its soul-eroding aura being inherited and enhanced by the Mantle of the Underworld.

A wave of nausea washed over Sunny's mind.

‘Argh!’

A mental scream rang in his head.

Luckily, he was prepared for the pain. His armor provided him with a solid defense against soul attacks, too... even ones coming from the Mantle itself. The attacking Nightmare Creatures, on the other hand, had no resistance to it at all...

Sunny had only kept the Broken Oath active for a second before changing the slotted charm back to the Blood Blossom, but it was enough to break the momentum of the tide of abominations.

The hunters staggered, the hounds stumbled and slowed down. For a brief moment, the whole mass of monsters seemed disoriented.

Sunny used this opportunity well.

The dark figure wearing a fearsome mask suddenly appeared in the very middle of the enemies, and before the Nightmare Creatures could regain their bearing, the great blade of the odachi turned into a whirlwind of darkness, leaving clouds of bloody mist and severed corpses everywhere he went.

Sunny had abandoned Saint's grounded style, reduced the weight of the Mantle of the Underworld to that of a feather, and turned to pure offense, dancing between the enemies like a dark, slaughtering demon.

For now, he was still at his peak...

But exhaustion was already not too far behind. As he fought, his breath was slowly becoming hoarse and labored.

'How... how long has it been?'

He thought back to what had happened until now...

And felt the first hint of desperation.

Just a couple of minutes.

The whole battle took slightly more than two minutes.

And he had to continue for at least eleven more...

The Novel will be updated first on this website. Come back and continue reading tomorrow, everyone!

Chapter 490: Break Point | Shadow Slave

Six minutes.

That was how long Sunny managed to hold on until things really went from bad to terrible.

By then, the ground in front of the Gate was littered with piles of corpses, their blood flowing down the pavement like a crimson stream. He had lost count of how many dormant abominations he had slain, how many ancient hunters he had sliced apart. Despite how strong and fearsome the primeval wraiths were, their assault had broken against the impenetrable barrier of his blade, his Aspect, and his will.

Sunny paid a price, though.

By now, his muscles were burning, and he had to force the air in and out of his struggling lungs. The Mantle of the Underworld held, but his body beneath the black stonelike metal was beaten and battered. The armor itself was covered in blood and dented slightly in several places.

Those dents did not come from the hunters, though.

During the third wave, new Nightmare Creatures emerged from the darkness of the Gate... among them were larger beasts, more terrifying than the hounds Sunny had been slaughtering.

And their masters.

The demons of the mysterious Barrow were similar to the desiccated huntsmen, but much taller, stronger, and better equipped. They wielded masterfully crafted flint weapons and armors made out of rotten leather and bone, their empty eyes burning with hungry red flames.

What's worse, they really knew how to use their stone spears and swords.

Met with the strange, ferocious, and deviously lethal battle style of the primeval demons, Sunny was sent for a loop. This was like nothing he had ever experienced before. They fought with the straightforward, yet insidious resolve of cunning apex predators, with the evil will to kill through any means necessary, always following the most efficient and barbarously cruel path to dominance.

It should not have worked, but it did.

The dents on Sunny's armor could attest to it.

Well... he shouldn't have been surprised. If these ancient wraiths came from people similar to his own world's prehistoric humans, then they were the most devastating of predators, ruthless killers on a planetary scale.

From what little Sunny knew about history, ancient humans had spread across the whole planet like a plague, eviscerating whole types of living creatures — including all other nascent branches of the human kind — in one fell avalanche. With their flint weapons and the knowledge of fire, they became nothing less than the cause and perpetrators of the sixth mass extinction, equal to the likes of massive asteroids and climate shifts despite their puny size and lifespan.

...He was kind of starting to miss the carapace legion.

In any case, Sunny somehow managed to kill these terrifying fighters — a few of them, at least — too. More than that, he reached into the very essence of Shadow Dance and greedily absorbed every nuance of their primeval and ferocious fighting style, and then reflected it back at the waves of Nightmare Creatures, bringing his already terrifying dance of death to a truly chilling level of brutality.

The Blood Blossom had long ago reached its limit.

Minutes passed, and despite the fact that Sunny was battered and growing dangerously tired, his reserves of shadow essence swiftly diminishing, for a few moments, he felt as though he had things under control.

That maybe... just maybe... he was going to stand his ground for the whole thirteen minutes.

And then, he realized that he would not.

As the sixth minute came to an end, a furious bellow shook the world, and something massive lunged at him from the darkness of the Gate. The barrier of corpses he had built in front of it exploded, and a giant beast — twice as tall as Sunny as weighing at least twenty times more — emerged from it in a cloud of blood and bone fragments, two empty eye sockets full of ghostly red flame.

Sunny stared at it with wide eyes.

The creature resembled a giant bison, its black fur mottled and rotten, a ridge of long, scarlet bone spikes piercing the hide along the spine. The head of the monstrosity was crowned with two jagged, bloodred horns.

‘A Fallen... that thing is Fallen!’

The bison was also different from the hounds and larger beasts he had been fighting against, since it — just like the ancient hunters — was itself a wraith. A corpse reanimated by the malevolent spirit of red flame.

‘Crap!’

Sunny hurriedly commanded the [Feather of Truth] to make his armor as heavy as possible and lowered his stance, knowing full well that he couldn't allow that thing to get past him.

In the next moment, two thousand kilograms of rotting flesh and sharp horns crashed into him at full speed.

‘Cr...’

For a split second, everything became dark.

...Then, Sunny found himself bouncing off the asphalt and then rolling across it at a terrible speed, up until the moment a wall of a building

stopped him and exploded, shards of cement flying into the air.

‘Not... good...’

Disoriented, he shook his head, feeling drops of blood seep under Weaver's Mask, and then used the Shadow Serpent to help himself stand up. Then, he looked toward the Gate through the red mist clouding his sight.

The massive wraith was approaching the six terrified Awakened. Its speed, however, was slow, and its steps staggered.

There was a big hole in its forehead where the thick, adamantine bones of the skull were shattered and cracked, bits of bloody pulp spilling out of it and falling to the ground.

Just before the impact, Sunny had brought his armored fist down on it, summoning the Moonlight Shard at the last moment.

His plan was to pierce the big bastard's brain, but because of the violent force and momentum of their collision, he ended up doing that, and then punching a hole through the creature's forehead with his spiked gauntlet.

Sunny's thoughts were slow and astray, but he was already starting to regain his senses.

‘I have a concussion, I think...’

Failing to breach the last few meters to the six Awakened, the bison stopped and swayed. Its legs suddenly caved, and it toppled over, sending a tremor running through the ground.

...A flood of abominations was already rushing into the breach it had created, though.

Into the empty space where Sunny had been.

Still disoriented, Sunny staggered, then raised the Soul Serpent weakly.

‘Bad. This is really, really bad...’

Chapter 491: Desperate Measures | Shadow Slave

As Nightmare Creatures rushed forward, the six Awakened began to act.

The two with elemental Aspects attacked first. Something flashed in the air, and then one of them was suddenly surrounded by a swiftly spinning ring of fire. The fire disc then flew forward and collided against the mass of abominations, immolating one of the hounds and burning several more.

The other raised her hand, and a thin blade made of nothing but air whistled as it bit into the flesh of one of the hunters, severing one of his arms at the shoulder.

Sunny blinked.

[You have slain a Fallen Monster...]

The fastest of the Nightmare Creatures were already lunging at the defenders. The girl he had spoken to before took a step forward and attacked with a slender saber, striking at the neck of a spiked hound and opening its artery with a precise cut. Two more Awakened were covering her from the sides, both wielding a shield and a Memory weapon of their own — one a short sword, the other a steel pike.

The last one did something to repel the arrows that were already flying toward their bodies, but Sunny had no idea what.

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

The Awakened were performing well... they acted with sufficient coordination and foresight, doing everything in their power to slow down the tide of approaching monsters. Although not elites, each of them was a capable combatant. They were brave and determined.

...And yet, it was not going to be enough. Not nearly enough to survive, let alone prevent the invaders from escaping into the city.

[You have received a Memory.]

‘What to do, what to do...’

Not fully realizing what he was doing, Sunny commanded the shadow to wrap itself around his body, and for the Soul Serpent to slither back onto his skin.

Immediately, he felt much more powerful, his head more clear. His muscles brimmed with raw strength, double what he had just a second ago. His breathing became deeper.

Sunny knew that he had to slow the abominations down, and then get back into the fight.

That was the only way...

Making a step forward, he swayed a little, and then grabbed the roof of an abandoned PTV to help himself keep balance.

...Bending down, he then grabbed the bottom of the heavy alloy vehicle with his other hand.

Sending all of his essence rushing through his body, flooding it with as much strength as he could muster, he then growled and dug into the alloy with his fingers.

And then, sending cracks through the asphalt, Sunny strained every muscle in his body to perform one devastating, explosive push.

The window of the PTV exploded, and as its frame deformed, the whole vehicle suddenly flew into the air. It breached the distance between him and the rushing tide of Nightmare Creatures and crashed into it from the side like a bizarre cannonball, turning several dormant beasts into bloody pulp, breaking numerous bones, and sending most of the front row of abominations tumbling down.

The runes shimmered in front of Sunny, and with no time to waste, he threw just one look at them, searching for the description of his new Memory. He

was only interested in one thing:

Memory Type: Weapon.

‘Good enough...’

Not bothering with reading the rest, Sunny summoned the weapon and used Shadow Step to appear amid the reeling abominations.

Some had avoided his improvised ram and were already either attacking the six Awakened or escaping into the streets.

He couldn't do anything about it now.

What he could do, though...

As an ancient spear with a head crafted out of a long and sharp piece of black obsidian materialized in his hands, he thrust it into the throat of one of the wraiths, then used its back end to slam another one in the chest.

Then, Sunny spun the spear and brought it down on the head of a lunging hound, shattering its skull with one terrifying blow.

While he tried to overcome the ringing in his ears and continued to fight, more Nightmare Creatures got past him... and more still were already emerging from the Gate

‘Die, die, die... die, you damn wretches, die faster!’

"They breached the line of defenders!"

The voice of the headmaster seemed calm, considering the situation, so the children gathered in the combat training hall of the school didn't panic, either. Nevertheless, they could feel that the adults were frightened, and that fear spread like an infection.

The children were frightened, too.

For many of the younger kids, this was the first time they experienced being near an opening Gate. Those who were older knew what to do, in theory... only none of those things could be done. There was just not enough time to evacuate or reach the nearest shelter, and so, the lessons they had learned were useless.

Everyone was gathered in the most protected place in the school — the gymnasium — and huddled together. The younger children were placed in the middle, the older ones near the edge, with the teachers standing the furthest from the center.

The combat instructors were armed with actual Memory weapons, which looked menacing and beautiful... at least to Rain, who had never seen her teacher wield one of his real weapons before.

With him, the other instructors, and a couple of bodyguards who happened to be inside the school because of those children whose parents were really important, there were five Awakened among them, each armed and ready to fight.

The other teachers and older students were armed, too, albeit with mundane weapons. Rain herself was holding her training sword, realizing for the first time how flimsy and pathetic it was. Before, the sword had always seemed to weigh a ton and be unnecessarily sharp.

Now, she wished that it was a real weapon, and not just a training one.

‘What is going to happen?’

Because she happened to be standing near the headmaster, she saw her combat instructor glance at him and say something in a low voice. Rain wasn't supposed to hear it, most likely, but she did.

He said:

"It's a miracle that they held that long, really. Only seven of them... I don't know who these people are, but they should have been overwhelmed in the first minute."

‘Overwhelmed? But... but... if seven Awakened were supposed to die in less than a minute, then what about the five protecting us?’

Rain suddenly felt cold and scared. The whole thing didn't seem real... how can something like this happen? This school was so prestigious and expensive, and so many important people sent their children here. Surely, the defenses...

As if answering her thoughts, muffled sounds of firing penetrated the walls and sent shivers running through everyone's bodies. The automatic turrets had gone online, which meant that there were Nightmare Creatures approaching.

Rain's father worked for the government, handling matters having to do with the logistical support of the Awakened, and although he didn't like to talk about work, she knew more about these matters than most kids of her age. Because of that, she understood how ineffective mundane weapons were against the creatures of the Spell, especially ones of higher Ranks.

So she just hoped that...

Something broke with a deafening crash, and the whole gymnasium suddenly trembled.

‘...C—curses!’

Rain gripped the hilt of her sword tighter, and turned toward where the crash had come from with a pale face.

Her eyes widened.

Hundreds of meters away, in the mass of Nightmare Creatures, Sunny sent another abomination to hell, threw its body away, and growled.

There were so many of them! Too many!

Through the shadow hiding beside Rain, he saw that those monsters that had gotten past him and the other defenders had reached the school.

He also saw more and more creatures arriving through the gate... beasts, monsters, and demons, Awakened and Fallen... there was simply no end to them!

And he was dead tired and growing weaker, fast.

His body was at its limit, his reserves of shadow essence were running dry, and even the Mantle of the Underworld was showing signs of straining to resist the neverending rain of blows he was not able to evade anymore.

Feeling blood streaming down his face, Sunny briefly glanced toward the distant school, then back at the gate.

And then, he shivered.

Something had changed.

Something was... coming.

In the darkness of the Gate, a new silhouette appeared.

A moment later, all the beasts that surrounded him froze, and then howled triumphantly, as if to welcome the new creature to the waking world.

The Gate Guardian had arrived.

The Novel will be updated first on this website. Come back and continue reading tomorrow, everyone!

Chapter 492: Gate Guardian | Shadow Slave

Sunny stared at the Gate, momentarily paralyzed by dread. Then, he snapped out of it and fought through exhaustion, rushing to kill as many abominations as he could before the Guardian came out of the Gate.

He had an inkling that after, there would not be an opportunity to pay them any attention.

‘Is... is it the Guardian? How many minutes has it been?’

He had no idea. Somewhere along the way, Sunny had lost count of the time. All he knew was that it had not been long enough...

Meanwhile, a hulking figure emerged from the darkness of the Gate, and as it did, the red flames burning in the empty eye sockets of the ancient wraiths flashed brighter, their dead mouths opening to produce a litany of menacing howls.

‘C—crap...’

The Guardian was more than four meters tall, his desiccated body resembling that of the primeval hunters and demons Sunny had fought, but at the same time much more frightening. He wielded a long spear, its blade cut out of a single slab of obsidian and covered in so many stains of ancient, dried blood that it seemed as if the stone itself had absorbed them and turned dark red.

The giant was wearing an intricate leather armor, much more robust and imposing than those of the lesser wraiths, with strips of strange, bluish iron woven onto it. His wrists bore dozens of bracelets made out of iron and bone, and on his shoulders was a cloak fashioned out of the hide of some terrifying monster.

The skull of the creature served as his helm, and his face was covered by a disturbing burial mask, its features twisted and bestial.

The mask — and the skull on his head — each had three eyes, all six emanating intense, malevolent red radiance.

Sunny felt a cold shiver run down his spine.

‘What... what is that thing...’

He didn't know what kind of a creature the ancient chieftain was, but had no doubts that he was a Fallen Tyrant... and a very powerful one, at that. Maybe the barrow these wraiths were coming from had been built to entomb this ancient menace, to begin with.

And his mask had three eyes.

...Anything with three eyes made Sunny shudder, for reasons he did not fully understand. After the Forgotten Shore, he knew that this was a sign of something too terrible for him to know.

Could he kill a Fallen Tyrant?

Maybe if he had a lot of time to prepare and study his enemy, and attacked from the shadow.

But now, with Sunny exhausted and battered, his shadow essence running out, and hundreds of Nightmare Creatures surrounding their master in bloodthirsty exaltation, he stood no chance. None at all.

Well... maybe a very tiny one.

And what else was he going to do other than try and fight, put his tail between his legs and run away?

Well... sure! Why the hell not? Sunny was not some kind of a hero, nor had he ever wanted to be one.

...But he wasn't going to run away just yet.

As the Nightmare Creatures renewed their assault with even more frenzied rage than before, he gritted his teeth and brandished the obsidian spear,

feeling the primal battle style of the ancient wraiths seep into his very bones.

Sunny was not done spilling blood...

He had a little bit of fight left in him, still.

In the gymnasium, silence and fear gave way to mayhem and panic.

The walls of the school had been breached, and Nightmare Creatures crawled inside, madness burning in their terrifying empty eyes.

"Back! Get back!"

The children were pushed against one of the walls, teachers standing between them and the terrible monsters with mundane weapons in their trembling hands.

The Awakened were engaged in a ferocious battle, but just the five of them were not nearly enough to stop all the abominations. It was inevitable that sooner or later, some of the abominations were bound to get through.

And soon, they did.

A giant, harrowing beast that resembled an infernal wolf, jagged red spikes growing through its black flesh and drops of saliva falling from its maw, tore free of the battle and lunged at the children.

Rain had never seen something so unstoppable.

How was anyone supposed to fight such a thing? No human possibly could...

The teachers tried, however.

Several of them drew their bows, but the arrows simply slid off the mottled black fur of the hellhound. The headmaster tried to stop the creature with a

heavy pike, but was simply thrown away, the weapon flying out of his hands.

And then, there was no one else standing between the monster and the defenseless children.

‘God... goddamit...’

Sunny was at the end of his rope. Which, in a sense, was precisely where he wanted to be.

He wasn't trying to stop the flood of Nightmare Creatures by killing all of them anymore. That was simply impossible, with how many there were, and how many were coming from the Gate every second.

He was, however, trying to draw as much attention as he could.

All of the attention, really.

And to accomplish that, he had to do one simple thing.

He had to attack the Tyrant.

How hard could it be?

‘Let's find out...’

Sunny wasn't planning to get into a prolonged fight with the damn Barrow Chieftain, or whatever that thing was called. He was just going to exchange one... maybe two strikes with the scary bastard, hopefully deal him a tiny wound, and Shadow Step into safety.

Enough was enough...

He knew his limits.

Tearing through the mass of abominations, Sunny cut a bloody path toward the hulking tyrant, and finally appeared in front of him.

As soon as the burial mask with three burning red eyes turned his way, Sunny suddenly felt small and weak. The pain he felt in his battered body surged, and an involuntary groan escape from his lips.

He just wanted to stop and fall to the ground.

To kneel...

‘Argh... a mind attack?! What, that is all?! Bastard, you should have met Gunlaug... learned how to really make people cower...’

And also, his own mask was much scarier than the crude thing covering the tyrant's face.

Fighting through the oppressive hex, Sunny lunged forward and raised his bloodied spear.

He didn't get a chance to attack, though.

Although it didn't seem as if the Tyrant of the Barrow was moving with haste, his hand shot toward Sunny with such terrifying speed that he barely had time to react. The giant didn't even deem it necessary to use a weapon, intending to crush him with a fist.

Making the Mantle of the Underworld as heavy as he could, Sunny turned the shaft of the spear around and held it with both hands, knowing to deflect the blow instead of blocking it.

He should have been able to...

The fist of the desiccated giant connected with the ancient spear...

...And easily shattered it, as though it was a mundane stick and not a Memory of the Ascended Rank.

Before Sunny could even feel the terrible impact reverberate through his bones, five massive fingers closed around his torso like a steel bear trap.

And squeezed.

‘C—crap!’

[Your Memory has been destroyed.]

What a shame... he didn't even get a chance to learn what it was called...

The stonelike metal of the Mantle of the Underworld groaned, but held.

His bones, reinforced by the steadfast temperance of the Bone Weave, held too.

Not that Sunny was having a good time. It felt as though he was being slowly crushed to death, unable to draw in a single breath. It hurt as hell, too... much worse than that, actually...

But worse still, while the tyrant had him in his grip, he couldn't use Shadow Step.

He couldn't escape.

‘I... I think... I messed up...’

As Sunny struggled in the tyrant's iron grip, the giant tilted his head a little, and easily lifted him off the ground, bringing his prey closer to the three burning red eyes.

The Novel will be updated first on this website. Come back and continue reading tomorrow, everyone!

Chapter 493: Advent Of Death

Sunny gritted his teeth and groaned, feeling his whole body being slowly crushed by the monstrous chieftain of the Barrow Wraiths. One of his arms was pressed against his body, and the other one was, too... but just barely.

If only he could free it...

But no matter how hard he tried, the tyrant's hold was just too strong.

...Back in the gymnasium, the terrifying beast was lunging at the defenseless children. Its maw was wide open, the red shine of the ghostly flames burning in its eyes reflecting from the jagged, sharp fangs.

It was flying directly at Rain, moments away from closing its jaw on her throat.

She felt paralyzed by fear, desperately wishing to run, but unable to move.

Was this how she was going to die? No, no... it couldn't be!

But it was...

Suddenly, a spark of a strange, dark emotion ignited in Rain's heart.

'Die? No... not like this... I refuse!'

She was holding a sword, was she not?

Even if that thing was going to devour her, Rain was determined to die fighting, just like she had been taught to. She was going to remain human, not a cowering animal only good enough to be the stronger beast's prey.

She owed that much to her parents, at least.

Knowing full well that her dull training sword was not going to stop a Nightmare Creature, Rain stubbornly made a motion to raise it. Even

though her mind was panicked and her thoughts scattered, the body remembered countless hours of practice...

Not that it was going to do her any good.

The hound was already so close that she could see every harrowing detail of its hideous snout and frothing maw. There was no escape...

‘Unfair! This is unfair...’

This childish thought appeared in her mind, as it had undoubtedly appeared in the minds of countless people just before they were killed.

...And then, something strange happened.

Suddenly, two beautiful magenta lights ignited in the darkness to the side of the lunging creature.

A moment later, a dark blade of a strange, stonelike sword flashed out of the shadows and easily sliced through the abomination's neck, separating its head from its torso.

A round shield made of something that resembled stone then appeared and swatted the headless body away from Rain, not allowing even a drop of blood to fall on her.

As she froze in shock, a graceful woman wearing menacing black armor stepped out of the darkness, two ruby flames burning behind the visor of her closed helmet.

Rain had never seen someone so terrifying, yet so magnificent.

The woman glanced at her with indifferent calmness, and then turned around to easily pierce another hound with her stonelike sword, then sever one more in half with a swift, vicious strike. It was as though the flesh of the abominations offered her no resistance.

‘Three... she just killed three Nightmare Creatures...’

And not only that, but she also killed them in the span of a second, with a confident, relaxed ease.

‘Who... who is she?’

Before Rain knew what she was doing, she heard herself saying in a small voice:

"Who are you?"

The beautiful knight did not answer and simply stood between the children and the advancing monsters, her back straight and solid like a stone wall.

Rain stared at that back, feeling as if nothing was going to get past this frightening, taciturn warrior.

A burning desire suddenly appeared in her heart.

She didn't know whether the menacing black knight was a human, a spirit, or a strange Nightmare Creature. But she knew one thing...

‘Strong... I want to be strong, someday. Strong like her...’

In front of the gate, Sunny was slowly suffocating in the iron grip of the Fallen Tyrant. He was being brought closer and closer to the three burning red eyes, and as he did, it felt as if life itself was being sucked out of him, his mind balancing on the verge of breaking apart.

‘What... the hell...’

There had to be something that he could do... some trick he could employ to wrestle free. A Memory he could summon, an enchantment he could activate...

But no matter how hard he tried, nothing worked.

Sunny's vision was slowly starting to grow dark.

‘Dammit! I... I need to...’

He could have summoned the Cruel Sight if his hands were free, but they were not. He could have turned the Mantle of the Underworld too heavy for the tyrant to lift, but it was already as heavy as the [Feather of Truth] allowed, weighing as much as a small mountain... what else was there in his arsenal?!

Sunny was almost ready to panic, and then... a subtle change suddenly happened to the world.

If was easily missed or discarded, more of a feeling than an actual shift. Sunny only noticed it because it felt strangely familiar.

...It felt as though the whole world suddenly became colder by a couple of degrees.

But why would it?

Before he could properly consider the meaning of the subtle change, though, something flashed through the air, and suddenly, Sunny could breathe again.

He could do so because... because the hand holding him wasn't connected to the tyrant's body anymore, the arm severed cleanly at the elbow.

‘What...’

Sunny fell to the ground and rolled away as a fountain of seething blood shot out of the stump that used to be a Wraith Chieftain's arm, evaporating and turning into a cloud of scorching red mist.

‘What just happened?’

Steel reeling, he struggled to stand up and saw someone landing on a piece of rubble next to him.

It was a beautiful woman who seemed to be in her late twenties. She was wearing a dark blue uniform with silver epaulets and leather boots, her short hair as black as a raven's feather, and her skin as white as snow.

Her icy blue eyes were colder than the deepest reaches of a frozen hell.

In her hand, the woman was holding a somber glaive, drops of boiling blood swiftly turning into ice on its slender blade.

She looked like... like Death herself.

‘Master Jet!’

Indeed, it was Soul Reaper Jet.

...The cavalry had arrived.

Chapter 494: The Cavalry | Shadow Slave

Sunny had never been that happy to see anyone in his entire life. Master Jet arrived just in the nick of time, saving him from having to regret the decision to send Saint to aid Rain.

...Not to mention that she was really pleasant to look at.

More importantly — taking off a Fallen Tyrant's arm with one strike! Even for an Ascended, this was an incredible feat. Tyrants were not creatures one usually dared to challenge alone. Instead, they were dreaded horrors that were capable of decimating whole cohorts of experienced, battle-hardened fighters.

Masters rarely worked together, simply for the fact that there were too few of them and too much for each one to do. But facing a tyrant was one of the things that pushed them to band together. And even then, not everyone was guaranteed to return from the fight.

Truly, Teacher Julius had not been exaggerating when he said that even Saints were wary of Soul Reaper Jet.

And yet... although her entrance was spectacular, would she be able to battle the tyrant and survive? Even though the chieftain was seriously wounded, that wound came from a surprise attack. Now that she lost the advantage, things could change really fast.

As if answering his thoughts, Master Jet glanced at him.

Despite the fact that they were surrounded by piles of corpses, the terrifying giant looming above them like an omen of doom, an unexpected smile suddenly appeared on her cold face.

"...Cool mask."

With that, Soul Reaper sprung forward, turning into a blue blur. Her movements were so fast that Sunny had only been able to perceive them

because he was an Awakened, his senses vastly superior to that of a mundane human.

Several things happened at the same time.

The somber glaive flew away as it spun fast enough to appear as a blurry circle. It cut a bloody swath in the mass of abominations, eviscerating dozen in a matter of a second as it moved in a wide arc.

At the same time, Master Jet streaked across the bloodied, broken asphalt and appeared behind the tyrant, then caught the glaive and immediately lunged forward in a devastating thrust.

The chieftain was much faster, though.

His spear seemed to almost teleport into the path of the glaive, positioned for an indomitable block.

Something weird happened then.

Master Jet's weapons suddenly turned ghostly and eerily luminous, and simply passed through the shaft to the spear, then effortlessly pierced... no, phased through the creature's armor, burying itself deep in his chest.

Right where one of the soul cores should have been.

‘What the...’

Things didn't go as she had planned, though. Sunny got that suspicion because of a slight frown that appeared on Jet's face, and the fact that the tyrant did not slow down even one bit.

Instead of having its soul damaged or one of his cores destroyed, the bastard simply took a step forward and raised his spear, which suddenly ignited with blinding light and flooded the area directly in front of the Gate with menacing red radiance.

Sunny sighed.

"Well... that's my cue to get the hell out of here."

This was not a battle he could handle, at least not in his current state. Master Jet seemed to have the situation under control — even if she ended up as no match for the Barrow Chieftain, she would at least be able to stall him until the rest of the government forces arrived.

Sunny, on the other hand, would probably just be erased from existence by the destructive fallout their battle was bound to produce.

Since Saint was doing fine in the gymnasium of the school, protecting both the children and the teachers, he didn't have to worry about Rain, as well.

All that was left was to do...

Was to get more shadow fragments and, hopefully, an additional Memory or two while Soul Reaper was doing the heavy lifting, of course!

'It's a good thing she arrived way faster than thirteen minutes, though... what an exemplary employee! I am starting to understand why Master Jet always seems sleep deprived. I hope the government gives her a raise...'

With that, Sunny picked himself off the ground and used Shadow Step to appear near the six Awakened, who were on the verge of being overrun by the advancing Nightmare Creatures.

Honestly, it was a miracle that all of them were still alive.

Summoning the odachi once again, Sunny cut down a hunter who had been aiming at the familiar young woman with a bow, and gave her a cursory glance.

Something exploded behind him, in the direction where Master Jet was fighting the tyrant, painting him with shades of deep red.

"L—lord Mongrel! What should we do?!"

Wasn't that obvious?

‘Run, you idiots!’

Grimacing behind the fearsome black mask, Sunny opened his mouth and said, his voice full of resentment toward the fact that he had to tell such an obnoxious lie:

"Stand and fight."

The girl stared at him, a sudden expression of shame clearly written on her face.

"Of course... of course... that is what an Awakened ought to do..."

Suppressing an infuriated groan, Sunny strained his aching muscled and raised the Soul Serpent.

‘What a joke! I better not see that quote going viral on the network...’

In the end, the Gate was contained with, miraculously, no civilian casualties.

Soon after Master Jet appeared, the government strike force finally arrived. Several swift air carriers descended from the skies in the howling of jet engines, and dozens of Awakened jumped down, all clad in high-quality armor and wielding powerful weapons.

Almost at the same time, armored vehicles appeared on the road and opened fire on the mass of Nightmare Creatures, their spelltech cannons managing to obliterate the weaker abominations and herd the more powerful ones away from the city streets. Operated by mundane humans, these machines were meant to control the battlefield and make it easier for the Awakened to eliminate those creatures too tough for human weapons to destroy reliably.

More cohorts, machines, and mundane soldiers followed.

Master Jet, unbelievably, ended up actually killing the tyrant. The break in their battle came when she suddenly shifted from attacking the chieftain

himself to aiming for the three-eyed skull he wore as a helmet.

As soon as she managed to crack the skull, the red flames burning in the eyes of the wraiths were extinguished, leaving them disoriented and weakened. Many simply fell to the ground, losing their perverted unlives.

The tyrant staggered, and then collapsed in a heap of rotten fur and desiccated flesh, sending a tremor through the bloody battlefield. This time, he was truly and utterly dead.

After that, the scales of the battle tilted drastically in the favor of humans.

Noticing a dedicated team of Awakened enter the school to secure the students, Sunny dismissed Saint and glanced at the scene of slaughter one last time.

His heart was in agony.

...Not because of the havoc and destruction that seemed to envelop once peaceful streets, but because of all the soul shards and contribution points he was going to miss out on.

‘Such cruelty! Such injustice!’

Well, at least he received a very large number of shadow fragments, several Memories, and even learned a new, profound and deviously deadly battle style.

This thought did not console him very much, though.

Almost on the verge of crying, Sunny sighed...

And dissolved into the shadows.

Without saying anything or demanding any credit, Mongrel was gone just as suddenly as he had appeared. All that was left behind were scores of dead Nightmare Creatures and the memories of those who saw him fight.

And some time later, in a dark and empty alley, Awakened Sunless, who avoided the summons to defend the Gate, walked toward an especially remote corner and bent down to pick up the Covetous Coffers, which were furtively looking out from behind a big garbage container.

Taking his communicator, Sunny patted the box on the lid and dismissed it, then stared at the screen with a dark expression.

A heavy sigh escaped from his lips.

"Ah, it's good to be a coward..."

The Novel will be updated first on this website. Come back and continue reading tomorrow, everyone!

Chapter 495: Masked Hero | Shadow Slave

By the time Sunny limped back to his house, the news of the Gate opening in a prestigious district of the city was all over the network. Luckily, the school Rain attended was situated really far away from where both of them lived — none of the mayhem had reached the terrace neighborhood, leaving it as quiet and peaceful as ever.

It was a bit strange, to see that nothing had changed here despite the fact that mere tens of minutes of riding the train away, the bodies of numerous Nightmare Creatures littered the ground. Life simply went on.

Well, it wasn't really that surprising. If people reacted strongly to every instance of a Gate appearing, nothing would ever get done, and everyone would live every day of their lives in fear. So, those not affected by the disaster directly did not allow it to disrupt their moods or routines.

People could get accustomed to anything, even the constant possibility of terrifying monsters suddenly coming out of an infernal rift in reality on their street. As long as important parts of city infrastructure weren't damaged, no one was going to care that much. And even if they were, citizens knew how to adapt — public transport would be rerouted, power outages would be dealt with by switching to autonomous generators or simply using candles, and so on.

The Gate was contained, the impact area was already being cleaned by the government workers. When tomorrow came, the cafe Sunny had visited would be open again, as if nothing happened. Life would return to normal.

...And those who had experienced the terror of the Gate firsthand would go on, silently bearing an invisible scar on their heart. But that was alright, too. Collecting scars was something that everyone who lived in this world had to do as they matured. This was the reality of the Nightmare Spell.

‘Why am I suddenly in a philosophical mood?’

Sunny shook his head, then scoffed and opened the door of his home.

Effie was in the living room, taking advantage of the state-of-the-art entertainment system Sunny had bought and paid for. When she saw him, a surprised expression appeared on her face.

"Gods, what happened to you? Did a piano fall on your head?"

‘What a strange question...’

Sunny sighed, then glanced at her arkly.

"No. A Gate fell on my head... sort of. Damned thing opened right near a cafe I sometimes visit. They sell incredible pastries, so... good news is, I managed to finish my pastry! Before getting the hell out."

Effie gave him a shocked look.

"Goodness! You were near that mess? I heard that the government barely gave people time to evacuate this time."

Sunny shrugged.

"Near, yes."

The young woman stared at him, then grinned.

"So... how many contribution points did you get? Enough to upgrade the entertainment system, maybe? You won't believe the quality of the haptic interfaces these days... I mean, you don't have to if you don't want to, of course. Just something to consider..."

He gritted his teeth and let out a frustrated sigh.

"None! I didn't get anything, okay?!"

Effie blinked a couple of times, then looked at him with a bit of disappointment.

"Well... no need to get emotional. There's no shame in avoiding such fights. Everyone wants to live, you know."

Sunny waved a hand dejectedly, then turned around.

"Yeah, I know. Anyway, I'll go take a bath. Have fun."

Leaving his guest... well, more like an uninvited housemate... alone in the living room, Sunny went away and prepared an ice bath for himself.

When he lowered his aching body into the cold water and endured the initial shock, a pleasant numbness enveloped him. Sunny glanced at the tapestry of bruises covering his skin, and sighed.

‘Can I still be considered pale if I am mostly black and purple? Gee, I always wanted to stop being pasty. But not like this...’

He closed his eyes and relaxed, enjoying the ice bath. None of his wounds were serious enough to really worry about, so he just had to wait for his body to heal itself. That was going to take a few days, which Sunny was fully intending to spend lazing about and doing nothing.

Wasn't that the dream?

After a while, he got a bit bored and decided to do something productive. He could either check on how much he had gained in the bloody battle, or see if someone had come close to connecting him to Mongrel.

Sunny thought for a few moments, then reached for his communicator.

‘Let's see the extent of the damage first...’

A few moments later, a low groan escaped from his lips.

"Oh for Spell's sake..."

"Shocking news! Mysterious online sensation Mongrel returns to single-handedly contain a Category Two Gate!"

"In the Shadow of a Lord: Mongrel's heroic stand caught on camera!"

"Who is Lord Mongrel, the courageous hero that everyone is talking about? The answer might shock you!"

"WE KNEW IT ALL ALONG! Mongrel is a woman confirmed!"

"STAND AND FIGHT: words to live by. Mongrel refuses to give up!"

Sunny stared at the screen of the communicator with resentment, then suppressed the desire to crush it in his fist.

‘What is wrong with people?!’

Apparently, a bit of his recent performance had been caught on tape. The shockwave of an opening Gate was supposed to mess with electronics, but one camera had miraculously survived.

The image was really grainy and stuttered every few seconds, but he could make out a dark figure moving through the mass of Nightmare Creatures, the Soul Serpent flashing through the bloody mist, its blade surrounded by a halo of black radiance. The battle style of the Barrow Wraiths and his need to spill as much blood as possible added an extra layer of brutality to the recording, making him seem like a demon that had escaped from some lightless hell.

Sunny grimaced as if in pain, and tentatively looked down, on the views counter beneath the video.

When he saw it, the communicator slipped from his hand and fell into the water.

Good thing it was waterproof...

‘Damnation... well, you've done did it now, fool! Congratulations! You've gone mainstream...’

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Chapter 496: Stand And Fight

"Today, a terrible tragedy almost happened in a peaceful and prosperous part of the city. It was a day like any other, until a sudden notification alerted the citizens that a Gate was about to open nearby.

With no time to evacuate, numerous people were going to die... but then, a courageous Awakened placed himself in the way of Nightmare Creatures, holding off the entire advancing hoard by himself and refusing to give ground until the government forces arrived!

This hero then disappeared without demanding any reward, not leaving even his name behind — only scores of slaughtered monsters and numerous saved lives. Who is this brave and modest savior? Where did he come from, and what is his true identity? Well, some readers might recognize him as the viral Dreamscape sensation, Mongrel..."

Sunny stared at the communicator, which had water dripping from it, with a dark expression on his face.

‘An official newspaper... this is a damn published article, not a random network thread!’

Previously, Sunny had only gone really viral among the people who were interested in the Dreamscape and dueling. Even though the recording of his performance in the Colosseum reached a wider audience, most of the people who had seen it did not pay Mongrel a lot of attention, since they didn't understand the details of his achievements.

This one, however... this one was different. Everyone could relate to a Gate opening and knew how terrifying and calamitous such an event could be. So, the new video showed Mongrel in a context that revealed just how bizarre and exceptional his deeds were to everyone.

Add to that the fact that the combination of the Mantle of the Underworld, the Soul Serpent, and Weaver's Mask looked really striking and menacing,

and that — miraculously — no civilian had died despite the late warning by the government, and Sunny found himself in a sea of trouble.

Suddenly, he was happy with the fact that he had not been able to augment himself with both of his shadows. At least his physical prowess did not seem too out of the realm of humanly possible... or rather, possible for an Awakened.

The other good news was that there, thankfully, was no recording of Saint. The cameras in the school had been properly damaged, and for that reason, people only knew of her by verbal description.

...Which caused its own share of problems because of how similar the Mantle of the Underworld was to her armor. Due to that and the nature of how rumors distorted the truth the more they were shared, soon, many people were convinced that Mongrel had protected the children in the school personally.

And that led some to become convinced that Mongrel... was a woman.

Sunny tiredly covered his face with a hand.

His worst fears had not come true, though. Despite the fact that the recording showed him using Shadow Step, no one learned the true nature of his Ability from the grainy image, and no one connected him and Mongrel together.

Maybe because of the ridiculous way A Song of Light and Darkness portrayed Sunny, but no one even tried to assume that Changing Star's bumbling sidekick was actually the dark, deadly, demonic swordsman Mongrel.

Instead, there were countless discussions like this:

Mongrail_Seeker: "New information on Mongrel's Aspect! Previously, we all thought that his Ability had to do with physical enhancement or perception, right? But we were all wrong! The new video clearly shows that his Aspect is actually spatial sorcery!"

Spirit of the Colosseum: "Do you realize what that means? It means that he didn't even use his Aspect in the Dreamscape duels! That was all just pure skill. Crazy!"

Anonymous User: "...You mean HER Aspect?"

Mongrail_Seeker: "Heresy! Lord Mongrel is not a her!"

Anonymous User: "...You mean LADY Mongrel?"

Spirit of the Colosseum: "I better ping @Mongrel's Son. He should know who his dad is!"

Anonymous User: "... You mean his MOM?"

Sunny let out an infuriated sigh.

‘Well, at least no one is mentioning me. If you think about it, the more people think that Mongrel is a lady, the better. Yes, this is good! No, seriously... so good... curse them all...’

And of course, there were a lot of nonsensical threads assigning some deep and profound meaning to every stupid lie he had said.

Like: "I am just a human: Mongrel reminds us of the only truth. There are no mundanes or Awakened, only humans and the Nightmare Creatures. He knows that everyone is equal before the Spell..."

Or: "Make them bleed! Wow, I have no words. So cool... how can anyone be so cool? At the end of the day, that is all that any of us can do. Repay each drop of human blood the Nightmare Creatures spill with a river of their own..."

But mostly, it was the damned idiotic advice he had given to one of the six Awakened near the end: "Stand and fight... am I the only one who got shivers after hearing that? Such simple, but all-encompassing adage. Lord Mongrel, he is a true Awakened..."

Everywhere he looked, it was the same three words. So many people were repeating, praising, and adding them to their bios that Sunny wanted to vomit.

‘What is happening...’

As people continued to watch the recording and discuss it, the truth got hazier and hazier. Pretty soon, everyone seemed to have forgotten that Sunny had not actually contained the Gate by his lonesome self.

No one mentioned Master Jet, who had literally saved his skin and took on the Guardian alone, eventually defeating the Fallen Tyrant without a cohort of Masters supporting her. No one mentioned the six Awakened who had helped him, and a literal army of government soldiers who had done the really heavy lifting and wiped out the entire horde, which he had only stalled until their arrival.

It was all Mongrel and his courageous, selfless, heroic stand against numerous Nightmare Creatures, as if he was some sort of a fearless, slaughtering demigod.

‘It's almost like no one even cares about the truth!’

Sunny threw the communicator on the pile of clothes and closed his eyes in frustration.

...It was a very strange sentiment. The irony was not lost on him one bit.

‘Curses... who knew that I would be lamenting a lack of truth one day? Me, of all people! What is this situation?!’

Indeed, making Sunny care about the truth was not easy.

It was no simple trick...

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Chapter 497: Unexpected Turn | Shadow Slave

Eventually, Sunny climbed out of the bath, dressed himself, and moved to the kitchen to make himself something to eat.

After the intense gauntlet of the Gate battle, he was hungry like a wolf. Ravenous, really...

Cooking calmed him down a little, and the pleasant smell made his mood a bit better. Now that Sunny had some time to think, he saw the whole situation in a new light.

Yes, his hope for Mongrel to be forgotten was utterly shattered. But there was a bright side to this fiasco — now that he had completely failed to keep a low profile... there was no more reason to. Which meant that he could resume practicing Shadow Dance in the Dreamscape, and hopefully master its second step before winter came.

He just had to rethink how he viewed the persona of Mongrel.

Initially, Sunny had planned for it to be unseen and anonymous, merely a camouflage he would put on to accomplish certain things — things that were inconvenient or too dangerous to be tied to his own name.

...Well, that ship had sailed. He was pretty sure that from now on, anything having to do with Mongrel was going to be at the center of people's attention.

But that wasn't necessarily bad. There were ways to remain unseen even in the spotlight. In fact, sometimes it was easier — all magicians knew that the secret to pulling off a flawless trick was not to become invisible, but to direct the crowd's attention toward something eye-catching and away from the hand performing the switch.

Sunny was not a magician, but he did consider himself to be an experienced cheat. The principle was more or less the same.

So if he played his cards right, the more attention Mongrel received, the more freedom he would have to move unseen in the shadows, accomplishing his goals under everyone's noses with no one being the wiser.

"Maybe..."

Such a thing was hard to accomplish and hid more risk, but also promised a greater reward. So, not all was lost.

Plus, he had protected Rain. That was the only thing that really mattered. Everything else paled in comparison.

Sunny finished his decadently generous dinner and moved to the porch. Sitting in the shade, he relaxed, grimaced a little due to pain, and took a sip of tea.

He was suddenly in a great mood. And why wouldn't he be? It was finally time to take a look at his spoils. The battle might have been hard and had almost cost him his life, but he had not fought for nothing.

Summoning the runes, Sunny glanced at the familiar string of them and smiled.

Shadow Fragments: [1814/2000].

‘Incredible...’

In just ten or so minutes, Sunny had gained more shadow fragments than he usually did in weeks.

From what Sunny remembered, he slaughtered almost a hundred Nightmare Creatures in front of the Gate. Granted, most of them were of the Dormant Rank and had not contributed any fragments to his growing cores, but still, it was a monumental accomplishment.

It made him think back to the first abomination he had ever slain, the Mountain King's Larva. How tense and terrifying that fight had been, how convinced he was that the perverse creature would kill him. Who would

have thought that one day in a not-too-distant future, he would be able to slaughter a hundred Nightmare Creatures of similar and greater power without being torn to pieces?

Sunny had come so far...

Lowering his gaze, he glanced at the runes describing his Memories and couldn't contain a delighted grin.

'Oh, I was so lucky today...'

Without even counting the obsidian spear he had gotten and then swiftly lost to the tyrant, there were six new Memories in his arsenal, most of them of the Awakened Rank.

Sunny studied them for a bit and, coming to the conclusion that none were better than his current ones or performed something he wasn't already capable of, dove into the Soul Sea.

He fed the Memories to Saint and looked at her runes, satisfied with what he saw:

Shadow Fragments: [179/200].

'So close...'

At this rate, he would probably be able to reach the full two hundred before having to go into battle with the vine creature inhabiting the wreck of the ancient ship. If Saint grew even more powerful before then, her presence was going to change a lot of things.

Sunny drank his tea in the peaceful silence of the terrace district, grimacing from time to time because of the pain in his bruised body. But even the pain couldn't spoil his mood.

"Ah, today was a good day..."

He watched Rain be brought home in a PTV, made sure that she was fine... well, as fine as a young girl could be after experiencing a close brush with

an opening Gate... and went inside.

He was due for some well-deserved rest.

In the evening, when the sun hid behind the horizon and the street lamps were flooding the city with pale white light, Sunny was resting in his living room, doing nothing in particular. He was lazily scrolling through the pages of a popular webtoon and appreciating the twists and turns of its simple story.

‘Crazy. Do people really think about such stuff?’

His thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a strange sound. It took Sunny a couple of seconds to realize what it was, since he had never heard it in this house before.

Someone was knocking on the door.

‘What the hell...’

Who could be visiting him at this late hour?

Putting the communicator away, Sunny sent his shadow to take a look and scratched the back of his head in confusion.

...Standing on his porch was none other than Rain, wearing her cozy home clothes and looking uncharacteristically nervous.

‘What is she doing here?’

For a moment, Sunny considered pretending that he wasn't home, but then sighed and stood up. There was no point in hiding, since they literally lived almost next to each other. Walking over to the door, he lingered a second or two, made sure that none of his bruises were showing, and then opened it.

"Uh... yeah? What's up?"

Not knowing that Sunny had already seen how nervous she was, Rain pretended to be calm and gave him a polite smile.

"Hey, Sunny. I... the food container? Mom wants it back."

He stared at her for a couple of seconds.

"Oh. Wait here..."

He walked to the kitchen, retrieved the container from the dishwasher machine, and returned to the porch.

"Here. Tell your mom that her cooking is delicious. We really enjoyed it!"

Rain took the container, but didn't leave. Instead, she just stood there silently, looking at him with a tense expression.

Sunny frowned.

"Can I..."

But at that exact moment, she suddenly blurted out:

"I know who you are!"

If Sunny had a drink in hand, he would undoubtedly do a spit take.

‘What?!’

As his heart almost stopped, he looked at Rain with a deadpan expression. Maintaining it cost him a lot, though.

‘What does she think she knows?!’

"...Well, of course you know who I am. I introduced myself when we met for the first time, didn't I?"

She opened her mouth, then closed it again. After a bit of an awkward pause, Rain said:

"No, I mean... I know that you are an Awakened."

Sunny blinked a couple of times, but before he could come up with something to say, she hurriedly continued:

"Sorry! It's just... my dad works for the government, so he knows such things. You are so young, with no parents, but are able to afford a house in this neighborhood. Plus, you don't go to a university or to work. So... you are an Awakened, aren't you?"

‘Solid reasoning...’

He hesitated, then simply shrugged.

"Sure. Not like it's a big secret, anyway."

Rain remained silent for a few moments, and then asked:

"...Are you any good?"

Sunny stared at her for a bit. Then, a grin slowly appeared on his face.

"Me? Oh... the best of the best! Probably the strongest Awakened in the world, really. No one else can even compare."

A slight scowl appeared on Rain's face.

"I'm being serious! Are you any good or not?"

Sunny lingered for a moment, then sighed.

"Yeah, I'm alright. Why are you asking?"

Rain looked at him for a while, as if gathering courage.

Then, she clenched her fists and blurted:

"Can... can you train me?"

Sunny stared at her, dumbfounded.

‘Well, I’ll be damned. That took an unexpected turn...’

Chapter 498: Superficial Connection | Shadow Slave

‘Train her...’

Wasn't that exactly what he wanted?

It was.

But wasn't it also exactly what he wanted to avoid?

Yes, it was that too.

Sunny was in a strange predicament. The solution to the problem that had tormented him for many months had suddenly fallen right into his lap out of nowhere, but to make use of it, he had to do something that went against all his previous reservations.

He didn't want Rain to be connected to him in any way. If Sunny was honest with himself, he had to admit that he was drawn to her... or rather, to the faint, half-forgotten memories of a different, happy time that she represented. His desire to reconnect with Rain was both selfish and misguided, since he knew that nothing was going to bring those memories back to life.

...And if Sunny was really honest, he had to admit that deep down, he harbored a lot of resentment toward her, too. For having a loving family while he had none, for being fine. For not needing him at all.

What a mess of emotions that was! And if there was one thing Sunny was really bad at dealing with, it was his feelings. For him, fighting hordes of Nightmare Creatures was much easier.

And then, as if his inner turmoil was not enough, there were external forces at play, too. There was his [Fated] Attribute, the strange connection he had

to Weaver, and Nephis with her murderous feud against the Sovereigns and the inhuman will to see the Spell destroyed.

The more he and Rain were connected, the higher were the chances of her being implicated in all this. But...

Maybe, as long as they only had a shallow connection between a kid from an affluent family and her hired tutor, things weren't going to get out of hand.

He also had to consider that the threat posed by a potential First Nightmare was much greater than that of being superficially tied to him. After all, Sunny had not done anything to attract the really dangerous kind of attention... or rather, had not been caught doing anything like that yet.

<o>,m ... While he was torn between these conflicting thoughts, Rain waited patiently, and then, misjudging his silence, said:</o>

"Oh! Of course, I will pay you. I have some money saved for a trip, and... well, I can also talk to my parents. It's just that you're the only Awakened I know... you know? Apart from my combat instructor in school."

Sunny looked at her, a deep frown on his face. Eventually, he asked:

"What brought upon this conversation? Why do you suddenly want someone to train you? You said it yourself, you already have a combat instructor. I thought you rich kids get taught everything you need in school."

Rain suddenly grew quiet and looked away.

After a while, she said:

"Ah, that... you probably haven't heard, but there was a... there was a Gate that opened near my school today. Many people almost died. I saw a real Nightmare Creature, even. It was... was this close to me. An Awakened like you won't probably understand how it feels, right? Oh! Sorry, what am I saying? Of course you'd understand. I mean... what I meant to say is that I

was absolutely powerless, and that was... not a nice feeling. Not a nice feeling at all."

He glanced at him, and said with a suddenly serious voice:

"So I want to become strong. Really strong. Strong enough to never feel that way again."

Sunny almost laughed.

'Oh, what irony... here we are, so different and in such different situations, but our desires are completely the same. Become stronger, so much stronger. As strong as one could possibly be...'

Rain paused for a few moments, and then added:

"And what we are taught in school is not nearly enough. At least... at least it wasn't today. Some of my classmates have private tutors that their parents hire for them, real Awakened fighters. But it's just a question of status to them. They don't really learn... or if they do, I didn't see it make any difference when the Nightmare Creatures were trying to kill us..."

Sunny smiled from the corner of his mouth.

"That's because a thousand hours of training will never be as impactful as one real fight. My own... mentor told me that once."

He hesitated for a second, and then sighed.

"I myself was trained by a very special person. The best fighter I have ever met, and probably ever will. The funny thing is, though, I sort of swindled her into teaching me how to handle a sword. Felt a little guilty about it ever since. So I guess it won't hurt to pay it forward and help someone like you out."

Sunny looked at Rain with a dark expression, realizing that he had already made a decision.

‘Ah, to hell with this... why make things complicated when they are actually really simple?’

He shook his head.

"Be warned, though. If you want me to train you, I will really train you. It's going to be hard as hell and hurt a lot. I don't want to hear any complaints, or see you slacking off. Understood?"

Rain suddenly giggled.

Sunny scowled.

"What's so funny?"

She waved a hand.

"Sorry! Sorry. It's just... it's funny when you act all strict and serious, because you, you know... are barely older than me. But I do understand. I'll work hard, I promise."

Sunny stared at her for a bit, then said in a low voice:

"What do you mean, barely older than you? I'm ages older than you! Just half the crap I've seen would be enough for a few lifetimes of the likes of you!"

Then, he smiled menacingly and added:

"Oh, and by the way, I also won't be cheap! I have mouths to feed, you know. That guest you've seen... I can't seem to get her to leave. There's also a stone-hearted beauty who always follows me around, and her diet is unreasonably expensive. But what can I do, attracting women with terrifying appetites seems to be my curse..."

He sighed, looked at Rain, and added:

"But if you still didn't change your mind, then fine. I'll train you, Rain..."

Chapter 499: Somewhere Far Away...

...Somewhere far away, in the depths of an endless and inescapable nightmare, a blinding disc of an incandescent sun was bathing the dunes of a vast desert in a flood of immolating heat. The sands of the desert were flawlessly white, and the azure sky above them was deep and boundless like an ancient ocean, with not a single cloud blemishing its silken expanse.

Being battered by the heat, a lone figure moved across the sand.

It was a young woman with striking grey eyes, her skin covered in terrible burns, her silver hair dirty with blood and surrounded by a radiant halo of reflected light. She wore charred remains of a shattered armor, and wielded a broken sword, its silver blade fractured and ending in a jagged edge close to the hilt.

The young woman walked forward, the trail of her footprints stretching far into the distance and disappearing over the horizon. To her left, there was nothing but an endless sea of white dunes; to her right, a line of black mountains eventually created a boundary for the scorching desert.

Far ahead, there was a tree with scarlet leaves and a scattering of something that looked like pale fruit hanging from its wide branches.

...This was where Nephis was headed.

She had to reach the tree before the night came, or... no, it was better not to think of it.

Her water had long run out, and the thirst was slowly taking hold of her mind. Her tortured body was a sea of pain, but she could still walk. She could still fight.

She was still not willing to give up.

<o>,m ...After a while, the tree grew closer.</o>

Nephis stopped and stared at its white bark, its scarlet leaves, and the shapes she had thought were fruit. But they weren't. Instead, tens of thousands of skulls hung from the beautiful branches, fastened to them with glistening threads of black silk.

A spring of water formed a clear pool in the shadow of the great tree, and on its bank, with his back to her, stood a figure clad in a strange, rusted armor.

‘A... human?’

No... the figure was too tall to be one of her kind.

As if hearing her thoughts, the creature turned around, revealing a desiccated face of a corpse, hollow eyes emanating ominous blue radiance, and six hands, each grasping the hilt of a weapon. Two hands held long swords, their blades sharper than a razor and curved slightly, two hands held menacing twisted sickles, and the last two held a heavy scepter and a broken shield.

The chestplate of the creature's rusted armor was shattered, revealing a harrowing wound beneath.

Being consumed by thirst and exhaustion, Nephis raised a hand, as if begging the creature to stop.

But, of course, it didn't.

With furious madness burning in its eyes, the abomination lunged at her, striking down with one of the sickles. It moved faster than lightning, sending a scarlet cloud of fallen leaves swirling into the air with a strong gust of wind.

Taking a step back, Nephis raised her broken sword to deflect the devastating strike, as if forgetting that it had no blade.

At the last moment, though, a ray of pure sunlight appeared where the blade should have been and stopped the sickle from rending her flesh.<sub>

</sub>

Nephis swayed from the force of the impact, but remained standing. Her cracked lips opened, and a hoarse whisper escaped from them:

"Let us burn, then... let us burn together..."

In the next moment, white flames ignited in her eyes.

Her skin suddenly shone with pure radiance, which then became brighter, and brighter... and then, brighter still.

Throwing the sickle away, she dodged two thrusting swords and danced around the armored giant, her blade of sunlight piercing the rusted armor with terrifying ease.

The two of them fought in the shade of the ancient tree, thousands of skulls staring at their battle with empty eyes as they swayed in the wind.

Nephis was much slower and weaker than the six-armed demon, but her skill was flawless, inexplicable, and deadly. She moved with the flow of the battle as if it was her natural element, controlling its cadence with indifferent ease. Her flesh mended itself seconds after being torn, and the flames burning in her eyes only grew hotter.

Deathly pale from the harrowing pain, her beautiful face grew colder and colder, becoming almost inhuman.

Her sword of sunlight, meanwhile, left molten marks on the body of the ancient demon. And even though such wounds could never harm it, after a while, the creature suddenly staggered.

...Of course, it did. That was a Memory left behind by the Nameless Sun of the Forgotten Shore, after all. Everything it touched was doomed to have its soul destroyed.

Finally, Nephis managed to find an opening and dashed forward, slashing upward with the Nameless Sun. The sunlight blade cut through the rusted

armor and severed one of the demon's arms, then fell down and sliced through another.

Before the creature could recover, she was already upon it. Nephis sidestepped a crushing blow of the heavy scepter and places her hand on the demon's face.

The creature froze, and then opened its mouth, as if to scream.

...However, all that escaped from it were dancing tongues of white flame.

As the pure radiance enveloping Neph's skin dimmed, it was as though the demon burned from within. Flaming fissures opened on its body, leaking pristine fire and radiating annihilating heat. His flesh boiled and blacked, and eventually, the blue shine of his eyes was replaced with blinding white light.

And then, that light was extinguished, leaving two dark, charred holes behind.

Nephis let go of the creature's face, and watched as its scorched body fell to the ground.

She stared at it for a few moments, and then indifferently turned away. Making a few steps forward, Nephis swayed and fell to her knees.

Then, she reached into the pool with trembling hands, put her palms together, and brought a handful of cold, sweet water to her lips.

Finally, her terrible thirst could be quenched.

Chapter 500 ...In The Depths Of A Nightmare

After drinking her fill, Nephis sat silently on the edge of the pool for a while, staring into the distance.

Her eyes, however, were moving, as if reading an invisible book that floated in the air above the calm waters.

Some time later, a pale shadow of a smile touched her lips.

‘That guy... he did something crazy again, didn't he?’

She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply.

‘How is he so fast...’

In the past months... years, lifetimes?... spent traversing the Dream Realm, surrounded by nothing except for pain and bloodshed, Nephis had started doubting the memories of her previous life. Sometimes, all of it seemed like something that she had simply imagined... a bittersweet dream she had invented to escape from the horrors of the real world. This world.

The world of neverending nightmares.

The change of the runes describing Sunny was the only connection she had left to the actual reality. Perhaps, it was the only thing keeping her sane.

...Even if the things she saw in the shimmering runes were sometimes hard to believe.

The impossible Lineage that should not have existed, the divine Memory of the seventh Rank, the strange essence of his soul, the true nature of the taciturn stone demon... and of course, of his Flaw.

It seemed that Sunny had much more secrets than Nephis had suspected. With that knowledge, many things made much more sense now... but at the same time, many others seemed much more incredible.

Well, it was not like she didn't have secrets of her own.

And anyway, it was all in the past.

Everything was in the past.

All that remained was the future.

...She did hope that he was doing well, though, out there in the real world. With Cassie...

Looking up from the water, Nephis shifted her gaze to the ancient tree and saw two weathered skeletons cruelly nailed to its white bark. Both stared at her with empty eyes, their teeth bared in eternal grins.

After some time, one of the skeletons said:

"My, oh my. Am I that pleasant to look at?"

The other grated its teeth and let out a creaky growl, then strained, trying to wrestle free of the large silver nails impaling it to the tree. However, no matter how furiously it struggled, the nails held true.

Nephis looked at the skeletons with a calm expression, no emotion reflecting in her cold, grey eyes.

The first skeleton spoke again:

"Is that... is that living blood I smell? Gods! What terrible sins have you committed, girl, to be cast into this hell alive? Even for a revolting nephilim like you, this is too harsh of a punishment."

Finally, she opened her mouth and said hoarsely, in a voice of a person who had almost forgotten how to speak:

"...What language do you use?"

The skeleton laughed.

"The only language there is in this place, of course. Why? Do you wish to learn it?"

Nephis remained silent for a long time, and then said:

"I seek a way back to the waking world. Do you know how to escape this place?"

The skeleton stared at her with a grin.

"The waking world? What is that?"

The second skeleton suddenly spoke, his voice deep and full of rage:

"Can't you smell the stench of a daemon on this abominable thing? She is one of Weaver's, you fool!"

The first skeleton turned its skull a little, and then asked:

"Is that so? My, oh my. In that case, you will not find guides better than the two of us. Just take us off this damned tree, and we will lead you to wherever you want."

Nephis stared at them for a while, then turned away.

"...I don't need two guides. Which one should I pick?"

The second skeleton strained to free himself again, and then roared:

"I am Azarax the Mighty, the Plague of Steel, King of Kings, conqueror of a hundred thrones! Choose me, nephilim! I will guide you to the shores of the Underworld and through its dark expanse, back to the world of the living! You will need a powerful guide if you wish to escape!"

She spared him a glance, then said to the other one:

"...What about you?"

The first skeleton answered in an aloof tone:

"Me? Oh, I am no one. Just a humble slave."

Nephis lingered for a bit. Finally, she asked:

"Why are... the two of you... nailed to this tree?"

The skeleton who had called himself Azarax growled:

"Don't you know where you are, abominable creature?! I am here because I led my armies into the great war, slaughtered a myriad of souls, and was punished for my strength and my pride!"

She shifted her gaze to the other one.

The first skeleton answered succinctly:

"I have angered the gods."

Nephis tilted her head a little.

"How?"

The skeleton sighed with regret.

"Well, if you must know... I slit a god's throat. My, oh my! One could say that it was a misunderstanding. Was there really a need to be so petty?"

The sun was already falling behind the horizon, and chilling cold was spreading across the white desert. Nephis summoned her white cloak and wrapped herself in it, shivering.

Soon, night descended upon the world, revealing a myriad of bright stars. As it did, the sand moved, and slowly, countless figures rose from beneath it. All of them were corpses with no flesh remaining of their perfectly black bones, some of creatures that resembled humans, some of towering giants, and some of beings who were too strange and terrifying to describe.

In a clamor of rusted armor and a litany of howls, the hordes of abominations clashed against each other, continuing their terrible battle

even in death.

Nephis moved closer to the tree, which somehow remained an isle of calm in the sea of terror, and looked at the first skeleton.

"You... remind me of someone I knew. Come morning, I will take you off the tree. To guide me though."

The skeleton cackled.

"Very well, vile creature. Even though you are revolting, I will keep my promise."

Nephis grinned.

"...What do I call you, then?"

The skeleton remained silent for a bit.

"A name? I used to have one of those, before. What was it? Oh!"

He moved its jaw a little, and then said:

"Eurys. Eurys of the Nine..."

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Chapter 501: Step Two | Shadow Slave

As waves of summer heat assaulted the city, its concrete and alloy jungle had turned into a sweltering oven. The air filtration systems were running without pause to save the people from suffocating in the clouds of pollutants, and in poorer districts, water had to be rationed because of the draught.

...Luckily, none of that touched the peaceful terrace neighborhood.

Here, people leisurely enjoyed the warm weather in the cool shade of the tall trees when they had free time, had unlimited access to fresh water and delightfully cold drinks, and lived their lives seemingly without a care in the world.

Sunny was constantly surprised to find himself among these fortunate and prosperous people.

For the past month, his life was very busy, but without any distress. He had been steadily working toward his various goals, slowly making progress toward each. His shadow fragments were nearing full saturation, and so were Saint's.

He had returned to the Dreamscape and participated in countless duels in the professional arenas, where the fighters were much more capable and gave him the opportunity to witness — and comprehend — many different battle styles. As the result, Sunny was able to further develop Shadow Dance, making his mastery of it much more solid.

The [Prince of the Underworld] enchantment of the Mantle was now also very different from how it had been before. Even if he wasn't going to reach the mark — six thousand defeated opponents — any time soon... or even a third of it... he was still making consistent progress. The counter already showed [1579/6000].

The drawback, of course, was that with each day he went without losing a fight, Mongrel received more and more praise and attention. These days, each of his duels gathered an audience as large as that of the top Dreamscape broadcasters... especially because some sort of a yearly tournament seemed to be approaching.

Mongrel's fans, however, were doomed to be bitterly disappointed. Sunny had no plans of participating in a foolish imaginary competition. He didn't care about fame and recognition, and was too busy to even spare it a thought.

Apart from practicing Shadow Dance, he also continued training with Effie and Saint, slowly bringing his mastery of the spear close to that of his knowledge of the sword. He also had to run the Brilliant Emporium, which was quickly blossoming into an actual enterprise thanks to Aiko's management and hard work.

...And of course, he had been training Rain.

"Come on! Seriously?"

She was currently in his living room, staring at him with outrage.

Sunny tilted his head a little.

"Sure. What seems to be the problem?"

Rain opened her mouth, then shook her head.

"Listen, Sunny, I understand that you are the teacher, I really do. But! It has already been a month, and all you taught me were wilderness survival lessons. And one — only one! — strike, which I had repeated thousands of times already. When I asked you to train me, I thought..."

Sunny grinned.

"You thought what? That I will teach you how to decimate Nightmare Creatures and bring all your enemies to their knees?"

She coughed in embarrassment, then said in a small voice:

"...Yes?"

He shrugged.

"But that is exactly what I am teaching you. Who do you think survives in the Dream Realm? The best swordsmen? The strongest fighter? No. You need to be alive to fight a Nightmare Creature, and for that, you need to know how to find food, water, how to read tracks and move through the environment without letting it kill you. And it will try to kill you, believe me."

He paused, then added:

"Yes, they taught you the basics in school, but not nearly enough. You want to live long enough to become strong? Then this is step one."

Rain let out a long sigh, and then looked at Effie for support.

The huntress was currently balancing in her wheelchair with a bored expression on her face, waiting at the door for some snacks she had ordered to arrive.

"...What? Listen to Sunny, kid. He might look like a wet weasel, but this guy knows his stuff. The things he lived through are simply beyond reason. Honestly, if he had any shame, he would be dead."

Sunny spared her a dark glance, and said:

"Thanks. I guess."

Rain frowned, accepting her defeat. A few moments later, she suddenly asked:

"What's step two?"

He raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

"You said that learning to navigate the environment without dying is step one. What's step two?"

Sunny looked at her for a few moments, then said:

"It's about your mindset. You're not ready for step two yet, though. We'll get to it when the time is right."

...For someone like Rain, that step was going to be the hardest. She didn't really have an aptitude for violence, yet, because her life so far had been nice and soft. But she would have to not only come to terms with violence, but also adopt it into the very core of her being, make it one of the cornerstones of her self. That was the only way to survive the Spell.

Ironically, for Sunny, that step had been the easiest. In fact, he had made it long before his First Nightmare, long before the Spell even knew of his existence.

Rain stared at him with disappointment, then sighed.

"...I just want to be strong like her."

He blinked a couple of times.

"Uh... like who?"

Rain suddenly smiled.

"The Awakened who saved me. She is so amazing! So strong, so beautiful. A true warrior, not someone like you..."

Suddenly, a mortified expression replaced her wistful smile.

"Oh! I'm so sorry! I didn't mean it like that... you are great, too, Sunny! I'm sure! Just, you know... not on her level."

Sunny stared at her for a bit, then said in a strange tone:

"...Sure. No offense taken. Not everyone is made to be a true warrior, that's right."

He wanted to say something else, but at that moment, his communicator suddenly rang, announcing an incoming call. Sunny frowned.

‘Who might it be?’

Very few people ever called him. Looking at the screen, he suddenly felt a bit cold.

...It was the Sour Reaper herself, Ascended Jet.

‘What?! Why... why is she calling me?!’

Sunny hesitated for a couple of moments, then answered the call:

"Uh... yes? Master Jet?"

The familiar voice, as relaxed as ever, came out of the speaker:

"Oh, hey there, Awakened Sunless. Are you free right now?"

‘What does she want?’

He glanced at Rain, thought for a bit, then said cautiously:

"Sort of. Why?"

For a few moments, there was nothing but static and the sound of a PTV moving coming out of the communicator.

Then, Master Jet asked:

"...Mind lending me a hand?"

Chapter 502: Sudden Request | Shadow Slave

A strange expression appeared on Sunny's face.

‘Lend her a hand? Me? Why would a Master need help from an Awakened?’

Meanwhile, Master Jet added:

"You'll be generously rewarded, of course. Well... I can't guarantee the generous part, really, but there will definitely be a reward."

His eyes gleamed.

"Really? What kind?"

She chuckled.

"A fair share of contribution points? Enough to exchange for a decent Memory, at least. Plus, didn't you say that you owe me a favor?"

That did not sound bad at all. Saint was on the verge of reaching the coveted [200/200] status, and was currently just a few shadow fragments away from it. However, Sunny couldn't really agree to the proposal without knowing what exactly she expected him to do.

...Or could he?

Master Jet was one of the two Ascended he knew, and his only contact to the government. This was a relationship worth maintaining, which meant that it wasn't wise to refuse her request for assistance.

Plus, Sunny quite liked her, and also owed her a lot... even before she had saved him during the Gate battle. They were both from the outskirts, and had a rather good rapport.

They had a connection.

He lingered for a moment, and then said:

"Alright, no problem. I'll do it."

Master Jet answered with satisfaction in her voice.

"Good. I'll come pick you up, then."

Sunny glanced around, evaluating how presentable his living room was. He was suddenly a bit nervous.

‘What the hell? What are you nervous for, fool?’

He cleared his throat, and then said:

"Sure... oh, wait. Let me give you an address..."

Master Jet laughed.

"Gee, Sunny. I work for the government, remember? I know your address."

Before he could respond, the call was cut off. Sunny was left standing with a rather dumbfounded expression on his face.

‘She knows... well, of course she knows. I wonder what else she knows?’

Noticing the strange look on his face, Rain asked:

"Did something bad happen?"

Sunny sighed, then slowly shook his head.

"No, nothing bad. Just some business I have to deal with. Sorry, we'll have to continue the lesson next time."

She stared at him for a moment, then shrugged.

"Well, alright. I'll practice back home, then."

With that, Rain picked up her training sword, said goodbye to Effie, and left.

A couple of seconds after the door closed behind her, the former huntress gave him an amused look.

"That pupil of yours is a bit dense, isn't she?"

Sunny frowned, offended by her words.

"What do you mean?"

Effie giggled.

"Well, you've been tutoring her for a whole month, and she still has no idea who the two of us are. We're just two average, random Awakened to her. I mean, it's not surprising that she didn't recognize you. But I am a very famous person, you know!"

Sunny smiled slightly.

"Yeah, yeah. Your pride must be really hurt, venerable Raised by Wolves. Please accept my sincere apologies... not everyone, you see, is obsessed with the Awakened. Rain for example is more interested in historical stuff, about or from before the Spell. Plus, the government mostly uses your Dream Realm appearance to plaster all over the city, so..."

Effie waved a hand.

"I'm joking, you doofus. She's a good kid."

She paused for a moment, and then added:

"...That's why it hurts me to see her wasting money on a hack like you..."

At that moment, there was a sound of a PTV stopping nearby, and of light steps approaching their door. Effie's eyes shined.

Turning her wheelchair, she opened the door and yelled:

"Finally!"

...Master Jet stood on the porch in her usual deep blue uniform, with one hand raised to knock on the door. Her jacket, as always, was carelessly unbuttoned, revealing her slim waist and generous figure. Her short raven-black hair was a bit messy, and there was a look of slight surprise in her icy blue eyes.

Effie stared at the older woman for a few moments, disappointment clearly written on her face. Then, she said dejectedly:

"Oh. You're not food delivery."

A polite smile appeared on Master Jet's face.

"Ah. Awakened Athena. It's an honor to meet the famous Raised by Wolves. I am Ascended Jet."

Effie glanced at her, then at Sunny, then back at Master Jet.

Then, she smiled.

"...Good job, doofus. I approve."

Sunny gave her a murderous look, cursed inwardly, and turned to Master Jet:

"Do I need to prepare?"

She shook her head.

"Your usual Memories should do. If everything goes well, you won't even need to use them."

He hesitated, and then asked:

"What if it doesn't go well?"

Master Jet grinned, making Sunny suddenly feel very uneasy for some reason.

"Well... then it'll go badly, won't it? We'll know when we know."

With that, she looked at Effie and said:

"Please excuse us. Time is of the essence, so we will have to leave immediately. It was very nice to meet you, Awakened Athena."

Effie winked at her.

"Sure. It was nice to meet you, too. Bring snacks next time!"

Sunny felt his ears turning red and promised himself to have a word with her when he got back.

...Or better yet, kill her. Yes, that would be much better.

‘What next time? There won't be a next time!’

He quickly put on shoes and followed Master Jet outside, then got into the familiar PTV. As soon as the doors closed, she sent the vehicle moving at full speed, the acceleration pressing Sunny into the seat.

The streets of the terrace district flew by in a blur.

Master Jet glanced at him, then said wistfully:

"That's a nice home you have there. Feels strange, right? To own one. I did the same thing after becoming an Awakened, actually. Granted, it took me a bit longer to earn enough. You could have afforded a much better district, though. You know that, right?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Yeah, I know. But I like it here. It's quiet."

She looked into the window and smiled.

"Can't deny that."

Sunny waited for a few moments, then finally asked:

"Uh... Master Jet? Sorry, but what exactly are we doing?"

She briefly glanced at the control screen of the PTV, sent it into a sharp turn, and answered calmly:

"We are going to hunt down a dangerous beast."

He frowned.

"Beast? What kind of a beast?"

Master Jet remained silent for a few moments. Then, she glanced at him and smiled darkly:

"...The most dangerous beast there is. A human."

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Chapter 503: Harsh Reality | Shadow Slave

Sunny shifted in his seat, a bleak expression appearing on his face.

‘A human?’

Why would a Master be hunting down a human? There was police for that.

Unless, of course, that human was an Awakened...

Sunny was aware that special government agents — carriers of the Nightmare Spell themselves — dealt with those Awakened who broke the law, simply because police officers were often helpless against criminals that possessed inhuman strength and wielded bizarre or dangerous Aspect Abilities. It made sense that Master Jet would be involved in that side of government work, too.

But, honestly, he didn't know too much about how these things usually went.

Glancing at her, Sunny asked:

"Is it an Awakened criminal?"

Master Jet spared him a short glance.

"A... criminal? Yes, you might say that."

She remained quiet for a few moments, and then corrected herself.

"No, actually, do not. The man we must find is not a criminal. He is an animal... a rabid one."

Sunny frowned.

"An interesting choice of words."

Master Jet was concentrating on driving the PTV, so she didn't answer immediately. When she did, however, her voice was strangely calm:

"You are not an inexperienced Sleeper anymore, Sunny, so I will be straightforward. You, of all people, should be able to understand. The Nightmares, the Dream Realm... they take a toll. Some people endure, some people break. Some people carry the nightmares back with them to the real world."

A dark expression slowly appeared on her face.

"From what I heard about the Forgotten Shore, you witnessed the worse of what the Spell does to us. Yes, we Awakened are at the top of the world... those who return alive, that is. We have all the privileges, all the money, all the power. But the mark it leaves on us never goes away. After all the pain, blood, and horror... after all the crap we the lucky few are forced to survive, many crack."

Master Jet looked at the road, her icy eyes full of unimaginable coldness.

"...Some crack a little, and some crack a lot. The government portrays us Awakened as powerful and noble, the saviors of the world... but really, most of us are walking on the edge, just one little step away from madness. All that trauma can mess one up really good, you know? It's all a big, big mess. So, when one of the Awakened loses control up and makes that last step... what do you think happens?"

Sunny remained silent for a while, thinking about the damage a deranged Awakened could do in the mundane world. His expression became dark and heavy.

He didn't even want to imagine.

"When that happens... you receive a call."

Master Jet glanced at him and smiled.

"Smart. Yes, when an Awakened goes out of control, I — or someone like me — receives the call. Things like that usually don't get out, because the government doesn't want them to. For obvious reasons. Everything is dealt with quietly, and so, here we are."

Sunny didn't speak for a bit. Then, he asked:

"So, what exactly is going to happen? We find this guy, talk him down or overpower him, and then put him in cuffs? Arrest him?"

What a funny thought that was. Him, making an arrest. Sunny had been on the other side of this equation a few times in the past, and never in his life had he imagined putting handcuffs on someone, and not the other way around.

Master Jet gave him a complicated look. There was almost... pity?

"...No. We are not going to arrest him."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"Will he be free to walk around as if nothing happened until the trial?"

Of course, there was another, much darker answer...

As if reading his thoughts, Jet slowly shook her head.

"No. No, he won't be walking around."

Sunny looked into the window.

"...Ah."

Master Jet sighed.

"If they summoned me, then things are already beyond that. Think about it... if a mundane human needs to be contained, you can put them in prison. But we... we are Awakened. Realistically, there is no prison that can be built to hold us. Not with every Aspect being unique, and demanding

unique means of containment. So there will be no arrest, and there will be no trial."

She accelerated the PTV even further, and then said evenly:

"...There will only be an execution."

Sunny looked out the window, not sure how he felt about that. Yes, what Master Jet said made sense. Awakened were too powerful, and too dangerous. If one of them lost control, then they needed to be dealt with, somehow. In a perfect world, they would go through the same process that mundane humans went through.

They would be arrested, tried, and either locked in a cell or receive proper help in a mental institution.

But this was not a perfect world.

So, instead, they would just be hunted down and executed, and the whole thing would be swept under the rug to preserve the spotless reputation the Awakened enjoyed.

Although harsh, this was the somber reality. He wasn't against the idea itself. He just didn't know how to feel about the fact that this time, he was going to be the executioner.

Finally turning to Master Jet, Sunny lingered for a few moments, and then asked:

"So why me, of all people? Why ask me for help?"

Master Jet glanced at him, then grinned.

"Three reasons, really."

She blew through an intersection, almost crashing into a heavy cargo vehicle, and then dodged it at the last second.

"First, I know you. There are many people who could have helped, but very few whom I would trust to have my back."

Sunny nodded, strangely pleased to hear that.

"Second, from the initial information I received, the suspect might have an Aspect that is somewhat similar to yours. High affinity to shadows. So, you'll be helpful when we're tracking him down, and if things go south, he won't be able to escape easily."

‘Another shadow user... interesting.’

She gave him a calm look, and added:

"And lastly... there are a lot of people working for the government, but very few who are suited for this kind of work. Unlike you and I."

Sunny considered her words. After a while, he asked:

"Because I am from the outskirts, just like you?"

Master Jet remained silent for a bit, and then gave him a bright smile.

"...No. Because you are a killer. Just like me."

Chapter 504: The Right People

Sunny wanted to deny her words, but in the end, simply turned away to look at the city streets flying by.

Master Jet knew, of course.

She had long known that he had the capacity to be a killer because of the cruel past the two of them shared, and more than that, she had access to the records about the events of the Forgotten Shore that the government agents had compiled.

Out there, Sunny had killed his fair share of people. He had not been the most active participant in the civil war for the throne of the Bright Castle, but his hands were covered in blood, too. There were very few survivors of the Dark City who, like Aiko, managed to go through that morbid ordeal without staining themselves with human blood.

And then there were other lives that almost no one knew that he had ended — Caster, Harus, the hunters who had kept Kai locked in the dark well... and Harper.

Even before that, he had killed the old slaver, Shifty, Scholar, and Auro of the Nine without batting an eye.

...Honestly, it was not a big deal. Except for maybe Harper, Sunny never lost sleep over any of the humans that had died by his hand. If he was honest with himself, he had to admit that some of them he even enjoyed killing, a little.

And it was precisely the fact that he didn't think of it as a big deal that proved Master Jet's words. Sunny was a killer, and not in the sense that he had killed before or had been taught how to. He had an innate aptitude for that sort of thing, and there were not a lot of people who did.

In fact, he only knew three. The first one was himself.

The second was Nephis. She was the one who had taught him about murder, after all.

...Maybe that was one of the reasons why Changing Star had chosen to impart her family battle style to Sunny. Maybe she had recognized that the two of them were similar... that both of them had seen and known the truth of this world. That he would be able to understand.

The third one was Master Jet.

Sunny suddenly realized that he didn't know much about her, apart from her Rank, her past as a kid from the outskirts, and her role as a government operative. Everything that he thought he knew about Master Jet had come from what others told him about her, painting an intimidating and imposing picture of the fearsome Soul Reaper.

That picture, however, did not reveal the real human hidden behind the loud nickname. In fact, it only served to obscure her more.

What nightmares Jet herself had survived on her path to becoming a Master? What were her hopes, her convictions? What were her goals?

He had no idea.

Thinking about it, Sunny hesitated for a while, and then said:

"Master Jet? Can I ask you a question?"

She glanced at him briefly and smiled.

"Sure."

Sunny carefully chose his words before formulating a question. In the end, he asked simply:

"...Why are you not a Saint?"

Master Jet laughed, her voice full of amusement.

"What a peculiar question. You say it as though becoming a Saint is something that just anyone can do."

He shook his head, not willing to let it go.

"But you are not just anyone. Sure, you might be younger than most Masters out there, but very few of them can compare to you in terms of talent and power. The fact that you chose to challenge the Second Nightmare proves that you have ambition. So why stop?"

She spared him another glance and asked with an easy smile:

"Why? What have you heard?"

Sunny shifted uncomfortably.

‘Crap...’

"I've been told that no one wants to go into a Nightmare with you because of your... problematic personality. Murderous savage and psychopathic killer — these were the precise words they used. Uh... sorry."

Her smile turned wider.

"Really? Haven't heard those before. Huh... I like it. But what do you yourself think?"

He remained silent for a bit, and then said with a bit of doubt:

"I don't think I buy it. I just took it at face value as an inexperienced Sleeper, but after the Forgotten Shore, that statement doesn't seem to make sense. Sure, it is important to trust those who you enter the Nightmare with... but at the end of the day, strength is strength. And you are very strong. You also work for the government, which proves your ability to be an adequate part of a larger collective. To work in a team. So, I simply don't understand."

Master Jet did not speak for a while, concentrating on the road. Eventually, she answered, a hint of darkness finding its way into her voice:

"...That is because you don't know enough. You're young, and haven't had to deal with the Awakened affairs a lot. Plus, some of these things people only learn after reaching a certain stage. You're not at that stage yet, but since you asked, I'll answer."

She looked at him, the smile disappearing from her face.

"It is very simple, really. Basically, you need the right people to help you become a Master. But to become a Saint... to become a Saint, you need for the right people to not obstruct you. Take it as you will."

She didn't say anything else, and Sunny did now ask, a deep frown appearing on his face.

'For the right people... to not obstruct you...'

He understood what Master Jet was hinting at, of course. He knew enough to come to the right conclusion.

What she just told him was that to become a Saint, one had to... receive permission.

And it wasn't too hard to realize who had to give that permission.

The Sovereigns.

Who else but them? The three Supremes who ruled the most powerful Awakened — the Legacy clans — from the shadows. Come to think of it, such an arrangement made a lot of sense.

There were just a few dozen Saints in the world, and each of them possessed unbelievable, mind-boggling powers. Would the Sovereigns have allowed for such powerful individuals to exist outside of their control?

From everything that Sunny knew about the vile nature of power and how the world worked, the answer was obvious – no.

So... did every Saint out there actually belong to one of the Sovereigns?

It seemed that they did. Even Sky Tide of the White Feather clan, who gave Sunny an impression of being a reclusive and fiercely independent woman, was beholden to a Great Clan... and, therefore, to Anvil of Valor — Vale of Aster, Song, and Vale — the Sovereign of that clan.

What about people like Master Jet, then? Someone capable enough to become a Saint, but either labeled as undesirable or simply unwilling to submit to one of the Supremes? What was the obstruction she had spoken about?

Was it a simple lack of support, or would the Sovereigns go much further to prevent an independent Saint from appearing in the world?

If they had no problem with sending assassins to kill the six-year-old daughter of their former comrade and companion, then they would surely have none with making someone like Jet meet an unfortunate end, should she act out of line.

He lowered his head and briefly covered his eyes with a hand.

'It's the same... it's absolutely the same crap as what Gunlaug had done in the Bright Castle. Gods, how unoriginal...'

But that was the thing about vile things. People loved to romanticize evil and those who committed it, creating countless alluring characters to act as compelling and brilliant villains. But in reality, human evil was almost always banal. It always followed the same disgusting, predictable paths, and led to the same hateful end.

No wonder Nephis wanted to destroy them so much...

Sunny's thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the PTV coming to an abrupt stop. Looking out the window, he saw that they had arrived at a dark and narrow alley, which was currently blocked off by a police cordon. Blinking lights of several armored police vehicles drowned it in an unsettling glow, and there were many officers on the scene, their faces pale and tense.

Master Jet yawned, stretched, and gave him a crooked grin.

"Rise and shine, Awakened Sunless. We've arrived..."

Chapter 505: The Slaughterhouse | Shadow Slave

Sunny get out of the PTV, somewhat apprehensive of what he was about to see. The police officers present at the scene looked very relieved to see Master Jet and him appear — their tense faces cleared, and the darkness hiding in their eyes seemed to dissipate a little.

This was not at all how these types of situations were usually portrayed in popular media. In the crime mystery shows, whenever a plucky mundane detective encountered a cold and by-the-book Awakened agent, their relationship always started very confrontationally, with mutual disdain and debates over who was supposed to handle the case... only to end as an entertaining team-up, of course.

Once again, reality turned out to be very different from how storytellers liked to portray it. There was no conflict over jurisdiction or negativity expressed by the police officers. Instead, they were genuinely happy to see the Awakened specialists arrive.

... Well, of course they were. It was just as the old policeman had once told, right before Sunny faced the First Nightmare — if he died there and no Awakened was near, they would have to fight the Nightmare Creature his body had turned into themselves. And that was not something mundane humans ever wished to do.

Master Jet walked over to one of the policemen and greeted him with a short nod. Despite the fact that he was much older than her — not to mention Sunny himself — the officer treated them with the utmost respect.

"Nice to see you again, ma'am. Greetings, sir. Let me show you the way."

He led them deeper into the alley, toward a heavy metal door that hid in the deep shadows. It was wide open, and there were strange flashes of intense white light coming out of it, mixing with the red glow of the police sirens. The whole situation seemed a little surreal to Sunny, as though he was in the midst of a strange dream.

'I mean... where else would I be addressed as "sir" by a police officer? Life sure is funny sometimes...'

Slightly amused by this thought, he turned to Master Jet and asked:

"What is this place?"

She hesitated for a few moments, then said in an unexpectedly dark tone:

"It's a... club, of sorts. Called the Slaughterhouse. One of the few such establishments in the city."

Sunny stared at the door, which had no sign or any indication that there was a club on the other side of it. Was this a marketing ploy to create a feeling of mystique and exclusivity, or were there things going on inside that needed to be hidden?

"...A peculiar name for a nightclub."

Master Jet smiled with a corner of her mouth.

"It is meant for a very specific clientele. The ground floor is your usual dance club, but beneath it, there is a VIP area with an underground arena. There is nothing illegal going on there, just... things that are in poor taste."

She paused, and then added somberly:

"They send Echoes, usually dormant beasts, to fight against mundane fighters there. The fighters are paid generously, of course, and the club profits from the rich assholes who enjoy watching this sort of thing enough to recoup losses if one of the Echoes is accidentally destroyed. Everyone wins... I guess."

Sunny frowned.

He knew that wealthy people were big fans of wasteful forms of entertainment, and that there were arenas where precious Echoes were made to fight each other just for the spectacle of it. Hiring mundane humans to battle them, though... wasn't it a bit too much?

‘Did I suddenly become a child after the Awakening?’

Of course, nothing was ever too much. Sunny knew all about how vice worked, from his childhood in the outskirts. His current surprise was just because he lacked knowledge of what forms it took among the more affluent layers of society.

"So what happened in that Slaughterhouse?"

Master Jet shrugged.

"That's what we have to find out. All I know is that everyone inside is dead. Kind of ironic, actually!"

The police officer guiding them spared her a glance, and then said hoarsely:

"It's a... proper mess there, ma'am. Not for people with weak stomachs. And also not something that a mundane human would have been able to do."

‘Charming...’

Inside, the air was filled with the smell of blood. Sunny found himself in a vast hall flooded by flashing lights, blinding white mixing with short moments of absolute darkness to create a strange and invasive atmosphere. It was hard to perceive anything in this strobe light hell.

Master Jet frowned:

"What's with the light show?"

The policeman looked down in embarrassment.

"Sorry, ma'am. We figured out how to turn off the music, but the lights are giving us some trouble."

She gave him an unamused look.

"Well, get on with it."

The officer turned around and walked away, shouting at his colleagues. A few moments later, the hall suddenly became enveloped in darkness, and then the regular illumination kicked in.

Without the constantly flashing strobe lights, the club looked smaller and more worn down than Sunny had expected. He did not pay too much attention to the design of the interior, the raised stage, or the bar with hundreds of expensive-looking bottles standing on the shelves behind it.

With a gloomy expression on his face, Sunny was looking at the bodies.

There were more than a dozen of them, all broken and terribly disfigured, as if chewed and spewed out by a tornado. But of course, a natural disaster had nothing to do with what had happened in the seedy club. The result only looked like it.

This was the work of an Awakened.

Suddenly, he remembered Master Jet's question, seeing it in a new light.

When an Awakened loses control... what do you think happens?

The answer was right in front of him.

Terribly battered human bodies were lying on the floor, drowning in pools of blood. Indeed, this was not a sight for those who had weak stomachs... but, for better or worse, Sunny had seen enough horrors to not be moved too much by such a scene.

It left a deep impression even on him, though.

Sunny didn't have to look too closely to realize what had transpired. The position of the bodies, the nature of their wounds... the murderer had not used some powerful Memory or let an Echo loose on these people. No, it was much simpler.

They just did it with their hands.

Back during the Gate battle, Sunny had thrown a heavy vehicle at the advancing horde of Nightmare Creatures, carving a bloody path in their ranks. That was the strength of an Awakened. Even if he had been augmented by a shadow, his own strength was still vastly superior to that of a mundane human.

A frenzied Awakened could tear through a dozen humans in a matter of seconds, and none of them would be able to do anything to stop it. In front of a Spell carrier, mundane humans were like paper dolls. It only took a little effort to destroy them.

‘That bastard...’

Sunny remembered how he had doubted whether or not he wanted to play the role of an executioner on the way to the crime scene.

...Rain could have been one of the victims. He could have been one, too, before becoming an Awakened.

As he was looking at the broken bodies, all his doubts disappeared.

Chapter 506: Silent Witnesses | Shadow Slave

As Sunny studied the bodies, Master Jet went away to talk to the police officers, and then returned with one of them. There was a disappointed expression on her face.

"No usable recordings left. Figures... places like this one only exist because they value the privacy of their clients. And the few cameras they did have show nothing but darkness."

Sunny looked at her, then sighed:

"Not much to tell from the victims, too. The murderer just used their fists."

She shrugged.

"That's how it usually goes, in situations like this. The most likely scenario is that the murderer was one of the clients, who went on a rampage because of either alcohol or stimulants, and a momentary failure to hold on to their sanity. So I doubt that this mess was premeditated."

Master Jet remained silent for a moment, and then added:

"He was lucid enough to use his Aspect to obscure the cameras, though. So dealing with him won't be too simple."

With that, she turned to the police officer and asked:

"Any survivors? Do we have witnesses?"

He hesitated for a bit, then gave her a strange look.

"That... yes, actually, there are a few. But..."

The officer didn't finish the sentence, and just stared at them with an uneasy expression.

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"But what? Are they refusing to talk?"

The policeman shook his head slowly.

"No, they're not refusing. They just... I don't know, something is wrong with them. They just don't speak, or even react really. I've seen a lot of people in shock, and sometimes, they can seem almost catatonic. But this... this is something else. Gave us all the creeps, to be honest."

Sunny and Master Jet glanced at each other, and then, one of them said:

"Lead the way."

The officer sighed, then escorted them to the back of the club, where an inconspicuous door led to the service rooms. The witnesses were gathered in a small office, standing there motionlessly, with nervous paramedics trying to determine the reason for their condition.

There were five of them, all sharing the same blank, strangely peaceful expression on their faces. They were completely silent, motionless, and still. They did not react to the arrival of new people at all.

Their eyes were calm and empty.

Sunny paled.

'How... how is this possible?'

It only took him a second to recognize what was wrong with the survivors, of course.

In fact, they weren't survivors at all. These people were dead.

To be more precise, they were Hollow.

'How can a mundane human be Hollow?'

Suddenly, he felt a cold shiver run down his spine.

Looking at Master Jet, he saw that she had a deep frown on her face, too.

The massacre in the dance hall was bad enough. But this, this just made the whole situation frightening and eerie. If before Sunny was just disgusted, now, he was starting to get concerned.

"What the hell?"

Master Jet stared at the five Hollows for a few moments, then turned to the paramedics.

"Go take a break, guys. Let these people be. They are already dead."

One of the paramedics — a mature woman with short blond hair and gentle eyes — looked at her with confusion.

"I'm sorry, ma'am? But... but they're fine. We need to..."

Jet let out a heavy sigh.

"Their souls are destroyed. There is nothing you can do to help them. Something else will take care of the rest."

The paramedic looked at her for a while, then glanced at the ground and silently walked away. Her colleagues followed, expressions of regret, anger, and horror clearly written on their faces.

The police officer stayed, but made a point of standing as far away from the Hollows as he could.

Master Jet stood silently for a few moments, her scowls growing deeper, then turned to Sunny.

"Answering your question, I don't know."

He hesitated for a bit, then asked:

"But how can a mundane human become a Hollow? It's only supposed to happen to those who die in the Dream Realm, right?"

She glanced at him, then silently shook her head. Eventually, Master Jet said:

"...Wrong. There is a very small chance of a powerful soul attack creating a Hollow. But beings capable of dealing direct soul damage are very rare, so it doesn't happen too often. Almost never, really."

Sunny walked closer to the five empty humans and studied them.

"Can you do something like this?"

Master Jet lingered for a bit, then answered simply:

"If I am really precise."

Something was very wrong with these people. And not just the fact that they were Hollow. There was something else... something that almost made Sunny's hair stand on end.

A feeling of subtle, but profound wrongness.

He reached out with Shadow Sense, and flinched.

Master Jet did not miss that sudden reaction.

"What? Did you discover something?"

Sunny gritted his teeth, then nodded.

"Their shadows... they're dead."

She stared at him with a raised eyebrow:

"How does this work? I don't know much about shadow affinity, sorry... it's a very rare type of Aspect. Does damage to a shadow correlate to soul damage?"

Sunny thought for a bit, then shrugged.

"I am not so sure myself. There's no manual for it, after all. But... only two things ever managed to damage my shadow. One was another shadow, and the other was a soul attack."

Sunny wasn't sure that he was comfortable providing Master Jet — a person specializing in exactly such a type of attack — with this information, but decided to share it nevertheless.

He trusted her that much, at least.

"So... since shadows are susceptible to soul damage, it is not too much of a leap to assume that they share a deep connection to the soul, or are tied to it somehow, at least."

She nodded, and remained silent for a while, thinking. Then, Master Jet echoed his recent question:

"Can you do something like this?"

Sunny shook his head.

"No. My Aspect doesn't have means of dealing damage to someone's shadow. At least not yet."

His Shadow Sense, meanwhile, spread throughout the whole club, allowing him to perceive it as a whole.

And there, deeper underground, he noticed something strange.

Sunny lingered for a few moments, and then turned to the police officer.

"Gather your colleagues and leave. Don't come inside again until either Master Jet or I tell you to."

The policeman opened his mouth, wishing to say something, then simply nodded and hurriedly walked away.

Master Jet glanced at Sunny with a question in her eyes.

"...What was that all about?"

Sunny gave her a dark look.

"That's... how do I say this? I think the killer is still inside."

The Novel will be updated first on this website. Come back and continue reading tomorrow, everyone!